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TED WHITE

editorial

RECORD ALBUMS: Something I've not mentioned often in these pages is my involvement in music—an involvement which has paralleled my interest in and involvement in stf over the years. When I moved to New York City in 1959, it was to find fame and fortune as a jazz critic, and it was not until 1962 that I became professionally involved with stf. I found small fame and little fortune as a jazz critic, although I was a contributing editor to *Metronome* magazine in the last two years of that venerable magazine's life. During those years I listened to more jazz albums than I had in the previous ten years—and few of them impressed me. Sturgeon's Law, you know: 90½ of *anything* is crud. The corellary, one I discovered for myself, is this: when listening to music for one's own pleasure—as in reading or the pursuit of any other form of entertainment—one acquires and consequently hears only (or almost only) the top 10% defined by Sturgeon's Law as worth while. The remaining 90% one skips—if one is lucky, reads reviews, or sticks with artists one trusts. But reviewers can't make this distinction. It's their job to separate the wheat from the chaff—the 10% from the 90%. In order to do that, a reviewer must audition it *all*. The result of this exposure to the overwhelming number of unworthwhile jazz albums was that I lost interest in that type of music for several years—retreating into classical music and the avant garde of electronic music—and never really regained the enthusiasm I once mustered for jazz. I continued to follow my favorites, but as they made less records I bought less. Although my record collection has over 1,500 jazz albums, I buy relatively few today, and those mostly by longtime favorites like Charles Mingus.

In 1964 the Beatles ushered in a new era in popular music, and rock and roll turned into rock. Today my collection of rock albums is equal in number to that of my jazz collection. And, over the years, I've written occasional reviews for the rock press—mostly in order to maintain my status on the reviewers' lists with the record companies and to retain the opportunity to deduct my album purchases as business expenses on my taxes. (Persently I do a monthly column for *Sounds Fine*, a rock adzine published locally.)

Over the last month I've been building permanent record shelves in my livingroom—for the past five years my collection has been scattered over the house on various "temporary" shelves—and even I am impressed by the sheer volume of my collection when gathered in one spot: a wall eight feet high and fourteen and a half feet wide, most of which is shelves. The shelves are of stained wood, and

(Cont. on page 118)

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Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy stories have appeared in Analog *for the past decade; now the brilliant sleuth—whose world is an alternative reality in which history did not follow the course we are familiar with and in which magic works—makes his debut in this magazine with an ingenious puzzle story concerning a locked house, a corpse, and—*

THE SIXTEEN KEYS

RANDALL GARRETT

"NAVAL TREATIES with Roumeleia are all very well," said Lord Sefton, with a superior smile on his jovial, round face, "but tell me, Your Highness, doesn't it strike you as intrinsically funny that a Greek at Constantinople should sit on a golden throne, wearing the imperial purple of the Caesars, and claim to be the representative before God of the Senate and People of Rome?"

"Indeed it does, my lord," said Prince Richard, Duke of Normandy, as he poured himself a bit more brandy. "I think it even funnier that a Frenchified Viking barbarian should sit on the ancient Throne of Britian and claim exactly the same thing. But that's politics for you, isn't it?"

The florid face of Lord Sefton appeared to approach the apoplectic. He seemed about to rebuke the Prince with something like "By heaven, sir! How *dare* you? Who do you think you are?" Then, as though he had suddenly realized who Richard of Normandy thought he was, he paled and drowned his confusion in a hurriedly swallowed brimfull glass of Oporto.

Across the table, the Lord High Admiral had roared with laughter. Then, still chuckling, he said: "Only difference is that the people of the City of Rome agree with John of England, not with Kyril of Byzantium. And have for seven centuries or thereabouts. Wasn't it King Henry III who was the first Holy Roman Emperor, Your Highness?"

The Lord High Admiral, Richard knew, was giving Lord Sefton a chance to recover himself. "That's correct," he said. "Elected in 1280. But he didn't become *King* Henry until '83, when John II died. Let's see . . . the next four Kings were elected Emperor, then, after the end of the First Baltic War in 1420, when Harold I was on the Throne, the Imperial Crown was declared to be hereditary in the Anglo-French Kings and the Plantagenet line. So Richard the Great was actually the first to *inherit* the office and title."

"Well," said Lord Sefton, apparently himself again, "I don't suppose it matters much what Kyril wants to call himself. I mean, after all, does it? Long as he does his part in the Mediterranean.

"Speaking of which, I suppose we shall have to find a way to come to some understanding with the Osmanlis, too, on this."

Illustrated by Richard Olsen

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"Oh, yes. We'll certainly have to get an agreement with the Sultan." Not for the first time that evening, Richard wondered whatever had possessed his brother the King to appoint Sefton as Secretary for Foreign Affairs. The man was not very bright; he was certainly slow on the uptake; and he had a provincial air of superiority over anyone and anything that he could classify as "foreign". Well, whatever the King's reasons, they were good ones; if there was more to this than appeared on the surface, the Royal Duke had no desire to even speculate on what it was. If John wanted him to know, he would be told. If not . . . well, that was the business of His Most Dread and Sovereign Majesty the King.

On the other hand, Peter de Valera ap Smith, Lord High Admiral of the Imperial Navy, Commander of the Combined Fleets, Knight Commander of the Order of the Golden Leopard, and Chief of Staff for Naval Operations, was a known quantity. He was a man of middle age, with dark, curly hair that showed traces of gray. His forehead was high and craggy, his eyes heavy-lidded and deep-set beneath thick, bushy eyebrows, his nose large, wide, and slightly twisted, as though it had been broken and allowed to heal without the services of a Healer. The moustache over his wide, straight mouth was thick and bushy, spreading out to either side like a cat's whiskers. The beard was full but cut short, and was as wiry and curly as his moustache. His voice, even when muted, sounded as though its slightly rasping baritone should be bellowing orders from a quarterdeck.

On first meeting the Lord High Admiral, one got the impression of forbidding ruthlessness and remorseless purpose; it required a little time to find that these qualities were modified by both wisdom and humor. He was a man with tremendous inner power and the ability to control and use it both wisely and well.

The three men were sitting around a large table in a well-appointed drawing room, waiting for a fourth man to return. It had been one of those warm late spring days when no air moves and nothing else wants to. Not oppressively hot—just warm enough to ennervate and to cause attacks of acute vernal inertia. In spite of that, the four men had worked hard all day, and now, in the late evening, they were relaxing over drinks and cigars.

At least, three of them were.

"Where the Devil is Vauxhall?" Lord Sefton asked. "He's been an infernally long time about getting that leather envelope."

Prince Richard glanced at his wristwatch. "He does seem to be taking his time. Would you be a good fellow, my lord, and go see what's delaying him? It's not like Lord Vauxhall to keep people waiting."

"Certainly, Your Highness." Lord Sefton rose and left the room.

"I thought for a moment," said the Lord High Admiral with a grin, "that you were going to say it was not like Lord Vauxhall to dally, and I was going to ask in what sense you meant the word."

Duke Richard laughed. "No comment."

A few minutes later, Lord Sefton returned, looking worried.

"Can't seem to find him, Your highness," he said. "Looked everywhere. Chap seems to have disappeared."

"Everywhere?"

"Library, office, and so on. Went

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upstairs and checked his bedroom and bathroom. Didn't search the whole house, of course. Might be in the kitchen, getting a snack or something. Perhaps we ought to turn out the servants?"

"Not just yet, I think," said the Lord High Admiral. He was looking out the west window. "Would you come here a moment, Your Highness?"

Duke Richard walked over to the window, followed by Lord Sefton.

Lord Peter pointed out the window. "Isn't that Lord Vauxhall's summer cottage, just beyond the little grove of trees?"

"Yes. That's what he calls it," said His Highness. "It looks as though every light in the place were on. How odd." He frowned. "Lord Sefton, you stay here and wait, in case Lord Vauxhall should return. The Admiral and I will take a stroll down there and see what's going on."

The "summer cottage" was a quarter of a mile away from the main house on the Vauxhall estate. The two men took a flagstoned pathway that went down a gentle grassy slope and through the grove of trees. Halfway up the sky, a gibbous moon leered balefully at the world beneath, casting a weird silvery radiance over the landscape, making ghostly glimmerings between the shadows of the trees.

"All the lights are on, all right," said Lord Peter as they approached the small house. "All the drapes drawn back. Looks as if there were a party going on, except it's far too quiet."

"No fear;" said the Duke, "if it were one of Vauxhall's parties, we'd have heard it long before now." He went up the four steps to the front door and knocked loudly. "Vauxhall! Lord Vauxhall! It is I! De Normandy!"

"Belay that, Your Highness," said the Admiral. "It won't do any good. Look here."

The Lord High Admiral was standing to one side, looking through the big window to the left of the door.

"You seem to find a great deal by looking through windows, Lord Peter," Prince Richard grumbled. But when he looked, he had nothing to say. His face seemed to freeze, and the Lord High Admiral fancied for a moment that it looked like the handsome face on the famous marble statue of Robert, Prince of Britain, who had died so tragically young in 1708.

The body of Lord Vauxhall was lying on its back in front of the fireplace, its dead, glazed eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling overhead. In the outstretched right hand was a heavy .44 calibre MMP, the Imperial service pistol.

After what seemed a terribly long time, Prince Richard spoke. His voice, while perfectly calm, had a curiously distant quality about it. "I see the body, but are you sure it's he? Where is the Lord Vauxhall whose dashing good looks fascinated the grand ladies of half the courts of Europe?"

"It is he," the Lord High Admiral said grimly. "I knew his father when I was a boy."

For the face of the corpse was that of an old, old man. Lord Vauxhall had aged half a century in less than an hour.

LORD DARCY, Officer of the King's Justice and Chief Investigator for His Royal Highness de Normandy, was in his sitting room, firmly planted in an easy chair, wearing one of his favorite dressing gowns—the crimson silk—

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smoking his favorite pipe—the big, straight-stemmed meerschaum—and reading his favorite newspaper—the London *Courier*.

Outside the half-opened window, what little breeze there was brought the faint sounds of a city which had prepared itself for sleep—small, unidentifiable sounds from the streets of Rouen. In the distance, a late night omnibus rolled over the pavement, drawn by its six-horse team.

Lord Darcy reached for the nightcap Ciardi had prepared and took a long sip of the cool drink. He had only a vague idea of what Ciardi put in the things—rum, he knew, and lime juice and Spanish orange-blossom honey, but there were other things as well. He never asked. Let Ciardi have his little secrets; the man was far too good a servant to upset by excessive indulgence in the satisfaction of one's own curiosity. Hmmm. Did he detect, perhaps, just the slightest touch of anise? Or was it . . .

His thoughts were distracted by the increased loudness of horses' hooves in the street one storey below. He had been aware of their approach for some seconds now, he realized, but now they sounded as if they were going to go right by the house. Had there been only one or two, at a slow canter, he would have paid no attention, but there were at least seven horses, and they were moving quite rapidly.

Good heavens, what a din, he thought. *You'd think it was a troop of cavalry going by.* He was torn between his natural curiosity to see who these late night riders were and the feeling of lassitude and comfort that made it seem like a terrible effort to get up and go to the window.

It seemed quite clear that comfort had won over curiosity—just when the horses pulled up to a halt in front of the house. Lord Darcy was on his feet and out of his chair to the window in as close to nothing flat as was humanly possible.

By the time the imperturbable Ciardi arrived, his lordship was already dressed.

"My lord . . . ." Ciardi began.

"Yes, Ciardi; I know. It really *was* a troop of cavalry."

"Yes, my lord. Lieutenant Coronel Edouin Danvers, commanding the Duke of Normandy's Own 18th Heavy Dragoons, presents his compliments. He requested me to give you this." He handed over an envelope. "He says he will wait, my lord."

Lord Darcy tore open the envelope and read the short letter.

"Ciardi, rouse Master Sean. Then rouse Gabriel and tell him to get the light carriage ready. Master Sean and I will be accompaning Coronel Danvers to Lord Vauxhall's estate—that's five miles out of the city, on the River Road toward Paris. I don't know how long we shall be there, so I'm taking my traveling case. If we need anything more, I shall send word. Did you offer the Coronel a drink?"

"Yes, my lord. He took ouiskie and water, and I left him with the decanter on the sideboard. Will there by anything else, my lord?"

"Not at the moment. I shall go down and talk to the Coronel."

Lieutenant Coronal Danvers was a spare man of medium height with a clipped, dark, military moustache and a tanned face; he looked alert and wide awake, neatly turned out in crisp field dress. He turned round from the sideboard as the tall, handsome Chief Investigator entered the downstairs receiving room.

"Evening, Lord Darcy. Get you out of bed, did I? Sorry. Orders, you

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know. Have a little ouiskie; fix your right up."

"No, thanks, Coronel. I see Ciardi has thoughtfully prepared the caffe service. As soon as the water's hot, I'll make a pot."

"Never drink caffe after noon, myself, my lord. Fine stuff in the morning, though. Fine stuff."

"Yes. See here, Danvers, what the devil is this all about?"

"Be damned if I know, my lord." Coronel Danvers looked genuinely surprised. "Expected *you'd* tell *me*. Thought perhaps His Highness put it all down in that letter I brought, eh? No? Well, all I was told was to fetch you and Master Sean and Dr. Pateley and Chief Master-at-Arms Donal Brennan and a Journeyman Sorcerer named Torquin Scoll and a troop of fifty horse." He turned back to the sideboard, added ouiskie and water to his glass, and went on: "I came for you and Master Sean, and sent Captain Broun and Senior Captain Delgardie after the others. They'll be joining us on the road."

"Wait a second," Lord Darcy said, "I'm missing data here. You weren't out at Vauxhall's with His Highness?"

"Oh, no! Rather not." He shook his head. "I was at home when Sir Ramsey came charging into my yard as though the Hunnish cavalry were after him to deliver those letters from His Highness. Didn't stay; said he was heading back out."

The copper kettle over the gas flame was bubbling happily now. Lord Darcy poured boiling water into the silver funnel that held freshly-ground caffe and watched as the dark liquid filtered through. "Somebody's hurt or dead," he said, more to himself than to Coronel Danvers, "and perhaps a crime's been committed. That would account for calling in Master Sean, Dr. Pately, and myself. And Chief Donal. But why fifty cavalry? And why does he need *two* magicians?"

"That's a good question, me lord," said a voice from the door. "Why does His Highness need two magicians? Who's the other one?"

The short, sturdy figure in sorcerer's robes was Master Sean O Lochlainn, Chief Forensic Sorcerer for the Duchy of Normandy.

The Coronel spoke before Lord Darcy could "Ah! Evening, Master Sean! Got you out of bed, did I?"

"'Fraid you did, Coronel Danvers." Master Sean stopped a yawn.

"Terribly sorry. Here, though; I'm fixing myself a bit of ouiskie and splash; let me fix you one. Best thing for you, this time of night."

"No, thanks, Coronel; I'll have some of the caffe his lordship is making. What other magician, my lord?"

"Journeyman Torquin Scoll, according to the Coronel."

"Oh. The locksman. Good man, in his field. He's a nut on locks. Absolutely does on 'em, me lord. Couldn't cast a simple preservative spell over a prune, he couldn't—but give him a simple padlock, and he'll have it singing the Imperial Anthem in four-part harmony in five minutes."

"Interesting," said Lord Darcy, handing Master Sean a cup of caffe. "Opens up all kinds of speculations. Far too many, in fact. For now, we'll just have to—"

He was interrupted by the entrance of the tall, lean, silver-haired Ciardi. "Your carriage is ready, my lord. I took the liberty of packing a basket of refreshments, my lord, just in case. Your traveling case is in the luggage compartment. As is yours, Master Sean, along with your instrument bag."

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"Thank you, Ciardi," said Master Sean. With the obvious exception of Lord Darcy himself, Ciardi was the only man in the world that Master Sean would trust to handle the symbol-decorated carpetbag that carried the instruments and tools of his profession.

"Excellent, Ciardi," Lord Darcy said. "Shall we finish our caffe and be off, then, gentlemen?"

The Coronel downed his drink. "I'll get my men ready, my lord."

As THE CAVALCADE moved through the gates of the Vauxhall estate some time later, Lord Darcy remarked: "Frankly, what I miss are the flags and banners, the band music and the cheering crowds."

Master Sean, seated across from him in the carriage, lifted both brows. "Beg your pardon, me lord?"

"Well, I mean, after all, my dear Sean, if we're going to have a parade, we should do it properly. The Duke's Own should be in full dress, with sabres, not field dress, with sidearms. The dozen Armsmen should be wearing full decorations. And, above all, we should be going at a leisurely, dignified pace, at high noon, not galloping along in the middle of the night, as though we were fleeing the country. No, no; I fear that, as a parade, it has left a great deal to be desired."

Master Sean grinned. "As your cousin de London would say, my lord. 'Most unsatisfactory.' "

"Precisely. Ho! We're stopping." Lord Darcy put his head out the window, looking toward the head of the column. "It's His Highness. He's talking to Coronel Danvers, gesturing all around, as if he were including the whole countryside. What the devil *is* going on? Come along, Master Sean."

Lord Darcy opened the carriage door and climbed out, followed by the stout little Irish sorcerer. He didn't bother to give any instructions to Gabriel; that tough old horse handler would know what to do.

The Chief Sergeant Major with Coronel Danvers took a small pipe from his jacket pocket and sounded *Officers Assemble*, followed by *Senior* NCOs *Assemble*. The Coronel and the CSM trotted their mounts out to a broad section of the lawn, and were joined by seven other dragoons.

"This night will be one the troops will remember, regardless of what happens next," Lord Darcy said with a low chuckle as he and Master Sean walked toward where His Royal Highness was now talking to Chief Master-at-Arms Donal Brennan.

"How's that, me lord?"

"They're top heavy," his lordship said. "We've got two squadrons with us. Out there, you have two lieutenants as squadron commanders and a captain as troop commander, which is all very fine. You've got two squadron sergeants and the troop first sergeant. Still fine. But, in addition, you have the regimental commander, the regimental exec, and the regimental CSM, who will be running all around trying to get something done while trying not to give any orders except to the captain in charge of the troop. The CSM can't even do that, so he'll be trying not to tell the first what to do. Oh, it will be fun, all right." He chuckled again. "It will be all right here, where the gas lamps by the driveway give plenty of light, but wait till they're milling about in those woods with nothing but a three-quarter moon overhead."

Master Sean frowned. "Why would they be milling about in the woods, my lord?"

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"Searching for something or somebody. Surely you noticed that every man Jack of 'em has a search lamp slung at his saddle. Lieutenant Coronel Edouin Danvers didn't tell me everything he knew. Which is all right; we'll get it straight from His Highness now."

Prince Richard had caught sight of Lord Darcy and Master Sean. "Ah, there you are, my lord. Sorry to drag you and Master Sean out at this time of night, but there's no help for it. Where is Goodman Torquin?"

"Right here, Your Highness," said a mellow, baritone voice from somewhere behind and below Lord Darcy's head. His lordship turned round.

The man in the working dress of a Journeyman Sorcerer was not over five-two, and was built like a wrestler. He was not a dwarf, merely short—although his head seemed a trifle large for the rest of him. He had a pleasantly ugly face that made Lord Darcy suspect he practiced pugilism on the side, large warm brown eyes, and, like Master Sean, he carried a symbol-decorated carpetbag in his left hand.

Introductions were made all round, including Donal Brennan, the grim-looking, black-uniformed Chief Master-at-Arms of the City of Rouen.

"Let's walk down toward the summer cottage, while I explain what all this ruckus is about," said the Duke.

Briefly, but completely, he told the story. The only thing he did not mention was the contents of the "important papers" that Lord Vauxhall had been carrying when last seen. Nor did he describe the body; they would see that soon enough.

"You must understand," he concluded, "that it is vitally important that we find those papers."

"You think they are in the diplomatic case, then, Your Highness?" Lord Darcy asked.

"Fairly certain. Vauxhall took the papers with him to put them it it. He had left it on his desk in his office, and we couldn't find it anywhere."

Lord Darcy nodded. "Yes. The obvious conclusion is that the papers are in that leather envelope. I tend to agree with Your Highness."

"That's why I called out a troop of the regiment," said the Duke. "I want these grounds searched thoroughly, and cavalrymen are trained for that sort of thing. Besides, I didn't want to pull that many Armsmen out of the city. A dozen is enough to search all the buildings, and that's what *they're* trained for."

Chief Donal nodded, apparently impressed by the Duke's sagacity.

The five men heard running footsteps behind them, and they all turned to look. Running down the grassy slope in the silvery moonlight was a figure carrying a black leather bag.

"It's Dr. Pateley," said Master Sean.

"Sorry to be late, gentlemen," puffed the gray-haired chirurgeon. "Sorry, Your Highness. Unavoidable delay. Sorry." He stopped to get his breath and to adjust the pince-nez glasses which had become awry. "Where's the body?"

"That's where we're headed now, Doctor," Prince Richard said. "Come along." The men followed.

"Sister Elizabeth had to call me in," Dr. Pateley was saying in a low voice to Master Sean. "She's a midwife and Healer of the Order of St. Luke. A little unexpected post-parturition trouble. Nothing serious. Stitching job. Baby doing fine."

"Glad to hear it," murmured Master Sean.

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Ahead of them, the lights gleamed from the windows of Lord Vauxhall's summer cottage. Near the door stood a bearded man in a Naval uniform of royal blue that was lavishly decorated with gold. Lord Darcy recognized him immediately, even in the moonlight.

After the introductions had been made, Lord Darcy gripped the Lord High Admiral by the arm and said, in a low voice, "Peter, you old pirate, how are you?"

"Not bad at all, Darcy. I can't say I'm much enamored over this particular situation, but otherwise everything's fine. And you?"

"The same, I'm glad to say. Shall we go inside and view the remains?"

"You can view 'em through the window until the locksman gets that door open," Lord Peter said.

Lord Darcy looked round quickly at Prince Richard. "You mean nobody's been inside that house yet?"

"No, my lord," the Duke said. "I thought it best not to break in until you came to take charge."

"I see." He looked searchingly at the Duke's calm face. Prince Richard knew what he was doing; Plantagenets always did. But if the papers were found in that house after Richard had called in the cavalry to search for it, he'd look an awful fool. That was the chance he'd have to take. Another hour's delay, if the papers were *not* in the house, might have been disastrous.

Lord Darcy looked back at the house. The windows were of the modern "picture window" type, with only narrow transoms at top and bottom to allow for air circulation—too narrow to allow a man to enter. Without the key, it would be a major smashing job to get in. Lord Darcy could see why the Prince had made the decision he had.

"Very well, then, Your Highness; let's get started. I assume Journeyman Sorcerer Torquin designed and built those locks and designed and cast the spells on them; otherwise you'd have let Master Sean do the unlocking work."

The Duke nodded. "That's right, my lord."

Master Sean said: " 'Tis a good thing Your Highness brought him. I, meself, would hate to try to unravel one o' Goodman Torquin's lock spells in less than an hour—"

"Meanin' no disrespect, Master," Torquin Scoll put in, "but would ye care to make a small wager ye can't do it in an hour and a half?"

"—without the key," Master Sean went on. "Of course, *with* the key—"

"I'll give ye the key and two hours and still bet ye a gold sovereign."

"I will not," said Master Sean firmly. "You already have more o' my gold sovereigns than I'd care to tot up. Taking lessons from you is expensive."

"You gentlemen can talk shop elsewhen," Lord Darcy said. "Right now, I want that door unlocked."

"Yes, my lord." Goodman Torquin opened his bag and knelt down to peer at the lock, looking somehow gnomelike in the moon's radiance. He took a small lamp from his bag, lit it, and went to work.

Lord Darcy went over and peered through the window. "*How* long did you say he's been dead, Your Highness?" he said, staring.

"Less than three hours," the Duke replied. "He looked bad enough when we found him. But now . . ." He turned his head away.

"If that's what I think it is," Master Sean said softly, "I'd better get in there fast with a preservative spell."

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There was the approaching thud of hooves on turf. Coronel Danvers came up at a fast canter and sprang lightly from the saddle. In the distance, through the trees, Lord Darcy could see search lamps flickering like large, slow-moving fireflies.

"Your Highness." The Coronel saluted. The Prince was, after all, the Honorary Coronel of the 18th, and Lieutenant Coronel Danvers was in uniform. "I have the perimeter surrounded and the remainder of the men on search, as you ordered. Senior Captain Delgardie will report here to me, directly anything's found."

"Very good, Coronel."

"Er—Your Highness." Danvers seemed suddenly unsure of himself. "Lord Sefton—er—presents his compliments, and wishes to know when Your Highness intends to begin interrogation of the prisoners."

"Prisoners?" said the Lord High Admiral. "What's this? What prisoners?"

"His Lordship means the servants," said Prince Richard with forced calmness. "They are not prisoners. I merely asked them to remain until this thing was cleared up. I left them in Lord Sefton's care. If those papers can't be found . . ." He paused and frowned slightly. "Chief Donal—"

He was cut off by Journeyman Torquin's voice. "There ye go, my lords and gentlemen."

The front door of the little cottage swung open.

"Everyone stay out until Master Sean is through," Lord Darcy said crisply.

Master Sean went in to cast the special spell which would stop the dissolution of the corpse. Everyone left him alone, as they had Goodman Torquin; nobody but a fool disturbed a magician when he was working at his Art. It was over quickly.

The other six men came into the room.

There is something about death which fascinates all human beings, and something about horror which seems even more deeply fascinating. The thing which lay on the floor in front of the big cold fireplace, illuminated brightly by the mantled gas lamps in the wall brackets, was both.

The big fireplace had facings of fine marble, white, mottled with pink and gold; the great mirror over the mantlepiece reflected the walls of the room, covered by smooth brocade paper that picked up the pink-and-gold motif. The woven brocade upholstery of the furniture repeated the pattern of the walls. It was a light, airy, beautiful room that did not deserve the insult which lay on the pale eggshell carpet.

The air was thick with the smell.

The Lord High Admiral was opening transoms above and below the windows. Nobody bothered to close the door.

"Here, Your Highness! Sit Down!" At the sound of Coronel Danvers' voice, Lord Darcy turned away from the thing on the floor.

Prince Richard's face had gone gray-white, and he swallowed a couple of times as the Coronel eased him into one of the big, soft chairs. "I'm all right," the Duke managed. "It—it's rather warm in here."

"Ah. Yes. It is that," Danvers agreed. "Where did Vauxhall keep his spirits? Must be . . .Ah!" He had opened a waist-high cabinet against the west wall. "Here we are! A good stiff one will brace you right up, Your Highness. Ouiskie? Or brandy?"

"Brandy, thank you."

"There you are, Your Highness. Be-

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lieve I'll have a little ouiskie, myself. Shocking sight. Absolutely shocking."

Lord Darcy, seeing that the Duke was all right and in good hands, knelt beside the corpse with Master Sean and Dr. Pateley. "Whatever killed him," his lordship murmured, "it wasn't a bullet from this." He disengaged the heavy .44 MMP from the right hand of the corpse.

The Lord High Admiral was standing, looking down over Dr. Pateley's shoulder. "No. A Morley military pistol makes rather large, easily visible holes."

Lord Darcy knew Lord Peter wasn't being sardonic—just blunt. He handed the weapon to the Lord High Admiral. "Look like it's been fired to you?"

The Naval officer's strong, capable hands unloaded the handgun, field-stripped it, put it back together again. "Not recently."

"Thought not. Well, well; what's this?" Lord Darcy had been searching the clothing of the late Lord Vauxhall and had come up with a small leather case which, when opened, proved to contain a series of keys, all very much alike, numbered form *1* to *16*, all neatly arrayed in order and attached to the case so that each could swing free separately. "Very pretty. Wonder what it's for? He has another set of keys of various sizes on a ring; this must be something special."

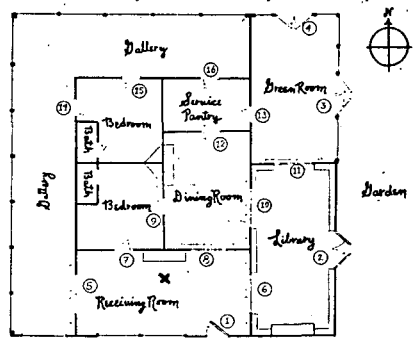
"Oh, yes; that it is, my lord," said Journeyman Sorcerer Torquin Scoll. "Made that set special for his lordship, I did. His lordship was a man of rare taste, he was." A broad grin suddenly came over the little man's face. "That is to say, my lord, he enjoyed locks as much as I do, if ye see what I man." The grin vanished. "I shall miss him. We enjoyed talkin' locks together. And workin' with 'em. Very knowledgeable he was, and clever with his hands. I shall certainly miss him."

"I'm sure." Lord Darcy looked back down at the keys during a moment of silence, then looked up again and said: "What do they fit, if I may ask?"

"Why, they're the keys to this house, your lordship."

"*This* house? *All* of them?"

The grin came back to the pleasantly ugly face. "That's right, your lordship. There's sixteen doors in this house, and every blessed one of 'em locks with a different key—from either side. Here, I'll show ye." He opened up his symbol-decorated carpetbag and brought out a thick loose-leaf notebook. After a moment of search, he selected a sheet of paper, made a small cross-mark on it, detached it carefully, and handed it to Lord Darcy. "There ye are, your



lordship. That's a plan sketch I made of this house. We're right here in the receiving room, d'ye see, where I made the cross. Those slidin' doors lead into the gallery, the dinin' room, and the library. That small door over there goes to the front bedroom. All the doors 're numbered to match the keys."

"What's this 'green room' that's all glassed in?" Lord Darcy asked.

"It's a sort of a greenhouse, your

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lordship. Lord Vauxhall called this a summer cottage, but he used it durin' the winter, too, when he was home. That's the reason for the fireplaces. One here, one in the library, one in the dinin' room, an' those little corner fireplaces in the bedrooms."

"How many sets of keys are there?"

"Just that one, my lord. Oh, the gardener has duplicates for keys three and four, so's he can tend the plants, but that's all."

Lord Darcy could sense a certain depressing tension in the room. Prince Richard was staring blankly at a half-full glass of brandy; Coronel Danvers was pouring himself a drink; Lord Peter was staring out the window; Chief Donal was watching Master Sean and Dr. Pateley go over the body.

Then he realized that the momentary shock that had hit the Duke had gone, and realized, too, what His Highness was waiting for. He had given change of the case over to Lord Darcy and was now trying to be patient. Lord Darcy walked over to where he was sitting.

"Would Your Highness care to inspect the rest of the house?" he asked quietly.

Prince Richard looked up and smiled. "I thought you'd never ask." He finished off the brandy.

"There's nothing more I can learn from the body until Master Sean and Dr. Pateley give me their findings. I can detect no sign of struggle. Apparently he walked in here with a gun in his hand and—died."

"Why the gun, I wonder?" Prince Richard said musingly. "Had he been frightened by something, do you suppose?"

"I wish I knew. He wasn't wearing a holster, so he must have picked it up from somewhere after he left you."

"Yes. He wasn't wearing a coat, so he couldn't have concealed a weapon that big. Oh. Excuse me a moment. Chief Donal?"

"Yes, Your Highness?" said the grim-looking Chief Master-at-Arms, turning away from the body to face his Duke.

"When you have finished here, go up to the main house and take charge. Keep the servants calm and don't tell them anything. They don't even know their master is dead: If one of them does, it might tell us something. And I don't want any interrogation of any kind until Lord Darcy says so."

"I'm through now, Your Highness. Got all I need. From now on, it's up to Lord Darcy." He flashed a smile which looked very uncomfortable on his face, and must have been, for it went away immediately. "Cases involving Black Magic are way over my head, anyway. Don't like 'em at all." With no further ceremony, he left.

"Well, let's see if we can find those papers," Lord Darcy said. "Might as well try the gallery first."

"Mind if I come along?" the Lord High Admiral asked.

"Of course not, my lord," the Duke said. "How about you, Coronel? Want to take the tour with us?"

Danvers frowned and glanced at his nearly empty glass. "I think not, begging Your Highness' leave; I'd best be at hand in case Delgardie or the Sergeant Major come with news."

The silding doors were locked, and Lord Darcy had inserted the key marked "5". It turned easily—too easily. It went right on round and clicked back into place. A turn in the other direction had the same result. The bolt remained solidly in place.

"Beggin' your pardon, my lord," said Torquin Scoll, "but I guess I'll

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have to come along with ye. The wrong key won't even turn the cylinder; the right key will, but it won't engage the bolt unless the right man is holdin' the key. It'll be a little tricky, even for me, since these keys are tuned to his late lordship."

He took the key case, fitted No. 5 in again, closed his eyes, and turned the key carefully. Click.

"There we go, my lords, Your Highness."

The four men went into the gallery.

"Don't you have a set of these keys tuned to yourself, Goodman Torquin?" Lord Darcy inquired.

"Do, indeed, my lord; used 'em just a week ago to do the regular spell maintenance. I'd have brought 'em with me if I'd've known what was afoot. But all that Captain—whatisname?—Broun. If that Captain Broun'd've told me where we were going. But no, he just says the Duke wants me, so I saddled up and came along."

"My apologies, Goodman Torquin," said His Highness.

"Oh, no need, Highness; no need. Not your fault. Military mind, you know. Take orders; give orders; don't explain, especially to civilians. Not your fault at all, Highness." Then he gestured with a broad sweep of a hand. "How do you like the gallery, gentle sirs?"

"Fascinating," murmured Lord Darcy. "Utterly fascinating."

The west wall was almost all glass—seven windows, six feet wide, with only narrow pillars between them. The heavy theater-type drapes which would cover them had been drawn up to the ceiling. Outside, in the darkness, one could see the occasional gleam of search lamps, the only sign that the dragoons were at work.

But that was not the vista that Lord Darcy had found fascinating.

The east wall was covered with paintings. None of them were obscene, and not all were erotic, but they all spoke of beauty, love and romance.

"These must have run him into quite a bit of money over the years," the Lord High Admiral remarked. "Beautiful work, all of 'em. There! That's a van Gaughn; always admired his work."

"Some of them," said the Duke, "were done especially by his late lordship's order. This one, for instance."

"That," said Lord Peter authoritatively, "is a Killgore-Spangler. I'd recognize her style anywhere."

"I also recognize the model," Lord Darcy said in a slightly dreamy voice.

"That, too," said the Lord High Admiral.

Prince Richard looked surprised. "Both of you are acquainted with Doña Isabella Maria Constanza Diaz y Carillo de la Barra?"

The Lord High Admiral burst out laughing. "Oh, yes, Your Highness. Oh, yes. Recognized her in spite of the red wig, eh, Darcy?"

"In that pose, I'd have recognized her with a sack over her head." Lord Darcy began to chuckle.

"What *is* so funny?" Prince Richard asked in a tone that held more than a touch of irritation.

"You Highness," Lord Darcy said, "that woman is no more a Spanish noblewoman than the Coronel's horse is. That happens to be Olga Vasilovna Polovski, Number 055 of *Serka*, the Polish Secret Service. She's the most beautiful and the most dangerous woman in Europe."

"Good God!" The Prince looked shocked. "Did Vauxhall know?"

"I hope so," said Lord Darcy. "I

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sincerely hope so."

"Oh, he knew, all right," said Lord Peter. "He was making special reports to Naval Intelligence at the time. That's what made the whole affair so delicious."

"I can well imagine," said Lord Darcy.

They walked on.

Lord Darcy cast a practiced eye over the long gallery. If someone had wanted to hide it, the eleven-by-fifteen, two-inch-thick diplomatic case could be concealed—with difficulty—in the theater drapes that hung in graceful curves above the windows. Or there might be some secret niche behind one of the paintings. But for now he would assume that it was in plain sight—or pretty much so.

Torquin the Locksman had gone on ahead to unlock doors. The three noblemen followed in his wake. The next door led into a small but comfortable bedroom. The wallpaper here had a pattern similar to that in the receiving room, but here it was pastel blue and gold. The upholstery on the two chairs and the spread on the double bed matched it. No fancy marble on the corner fireplace, however; it was of plain fieldstone, with an unfinished ruggedness that contrasted nicely with the patterned smoothness of the rest of the room.

"Wonder how old this house is?" the Lord High Admiral asked idly as they searched the room.

"Not very, in comparison to the manor house," Lord Darcy said. "That's late Robertian—1700 or thereabout."

"It's practically brand new," Prince Richard said. "Vauxhall built it himself in 1927 or '28. It's been redecorated a couple of times since, I understand, but no drastic changes. It's rather nice, I think. And the picture gallery is much more inspiring than the one up the hill. All those ghastly old ancestors staring at you."

"Your Highness ought to know," murmured Lord Darcy.

"Oh, God, yes! Have you seen that portrait of my thrice-great grandfather, Gwiliam IV? the big one, that hangs in Westminster? It was painted in 1810, just two years before he died. Really grim-looking old boy at eighty. Well, that picture used to scare the devil out of me when I was a boy. I wouldn't go anywhere near it. The eyes aren't quite looking at you, you know, but you get the feeling that if the old man just shifted them a little, he'd see you straight on. At least, *I* thought so. And I had the feeling that if he ever looked straight at me he would see what a wicked little boy I was, and would leap down from his frame and devour me upon the spot. Well, there's nothing in this clothespress."

"And nothing in the bathroom," said Lord Darcy.

"It's dark under this bed," the Lord High Admiral said. "Lend me your pipe lighter, Lord Darcy. Thanks. Mmmm. No. Nothing under there." He stood up and brushed off the knees of his trousers.

Lord Darcy was looking up at the skylight. "That doesn't look as though it opens."

The other two looked up. "No," said the Lord High Admiral. "Except for that narrow transom on the leeward side."

"Yes," the Duke said, pointing. "It's operated by that cord that hangs down the wall. It goes up through that pulley, there, you see."

"I suppose all of the inner rooms have skylights, Your highness?" Lord Darcy said.

"Oh, yes, my lord. Even the library

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has one, as you'll see. It has no windows, since the walls are covered with bookshelves. The only other light in there would be from the glass double doors that lead into the garden." The Duke looked all around. "Well, the next stop is the service pantry."

They went out the north wing of the L-shaped gallery, turned right, and went to the door of the service pantry. It swung open at a touch; Torquin had been there before them.

The room was, in effect, a very small kitchen. Vauxhall did not throw big dining parties here; when he wanted food served, the servants brought it down from the main house.

"Not very big," the Lord High Admiral said, "but lots of places to look." He opened the warming oven, saw nothing, closed it, and went on to the cabinets.

Lord Darcy climbed up on a little three-legged stool and began going through shelves. "Your Highness," he said, "would I be out of order is I asked just what these 'important papers' are?"

"They're the only copies, in three languages, of our new naval treaty with Roumeleia."

"Oh, *ho*. I see."

"As ambassador to the Basileus at Constantinople, Lord Vauxhall was instrumental in persuading Kyril to agree to all the terms. The Greeks, of course, control the bosphoros and the Dardanelles, which means they have the Black Sea bottled off from the Mediterranean.

"Casimir of Poland is still trying to get around our naval blockade of the North Sea and the Baltic. By the treaty we forced on him after the '39 war, no Polish armed vessel is to pass the Fourteenth Meridian; and no Imperial armed vessel is to pass the Tenth Meridian going the other way."

"Nobody here but us Scandanavians," growled the High Admiral.

"Right," said Prince Richard. "And the treaty also permits Scandanavian or Imperial naval vessels to stop and search *any* Polish vessel between the Eighth and Fourteen Meridians for contraband—arms and ammunition—and to seize any that's found.

"But the situation's different in the Mediterranean. The Greeks didn't like what Poland pulled during the '39 War, and took advantage of our winning it to say that no armed vessel of *any* nation—except Roumeleia, of course—would be allowed in the Sea of Marmara. But they didn't quite have guts enough to put a stop-search-and-seizure clause in that fiat.

"Emperor Kyril is ready to do that now, provided we'll back him up in the Mediterranean. The Roumeleian Navy isn't strong enough by a long sight to patrol the Black, the Marmara, *and* the Mediterranean, and they're still worried about the Osmanlis, to say nothing of North Africa. This treaty arranges for all that."

"I see," Lord Darcy said. He was silent for a moment, then: "May I ask, Your Highness, why all this sudden need for a search of King Casimir's merchant ships?"

The Lord High Admiral's chuckle was unpleasant. "May I tell him, Your Highness?"

"Certainly. The King my brother has trusted Lord Darcy with state secrets far more crucial than this one."

That was not what the Lord High Admiral had meant, but he let it pass. He said: "His Slavonic Majesty, Casimir IX, has concocted a scheme to get himself a fleet in the Atlantic. It's a lovely scheme—and it could work. In fact—*it may already have worked*. We may have caught on just a little

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too late for comfort."

"Three ships is hardly a fleet," the Duke objected.

"Three ships *that we know of*, Your Highness. At any rate, what has happened is this: A few years ago, Poland started expanding her merchant fleet with a new type of vessel—a little faster, a little more sturdily built. They started making them first up in the Pomeranian Bay area. Six months later, they began tooling up for them in the Black Sea—at Odessa.

"More time goes by. At some time—which we haven't nailed down yet—the game of Shells-and-Pea begins."

"The papers don't seem to be in here," the Duke interrutped. "Shall we go into the green room?"

"Yes," said Lord Darcy. "Let's see if naval treaties grow on bushes."

There were no bushes. The room, like the gallery, had two outside walls that were practically all glass. Greenery and flowers grew in pots and tubs all over the place. Nothing spectacular, but it was colorful and pleasant.

The search continued.

"Thank goodness the roses are the thornless variety," said the Lord High Admiral as he pushed leaves and blooms aside. "Where was I?"

"You were playing the Shell-and-Pea Game with Polish merchant vessels," said Lord Darcy.

"Oh, yes. Now, you must understand that these ships are all alike. We call 'em the *Mielic* class: the *Mielic* was the first one off the ways, and they're all named after small cities. And you can't tell one from the next, except for the name painted on 'em.

"Here's what happens. Let's say the *Zamość* sails from—oh, Danzig. She stops at the Helsingør-Hälsingborg Naval Check Point for inspection, which she passes with flying colors."

"I was afraid you'd say that," murmured Lord Darcy as he peered under a long wooden bench.

"From there," Lord Peter continued remorselessly, "she continues to Antwerp. This time, *we* check her. She's clean."

"And her colors are still flying," said Lord Darcy.

"Exactly. So she works her way south. Bordeaux, San Sebastián, La Coruña, Lisbon, and finally through the Strait of Gibraltar. She does business around the Mediterranean for a while. Finally, she heads east, through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorous, into the Black Sea, and straight for Odessa. A week later—Ouch! That rose *does* have thorns! A week later, she's coming back again. the *Zamość* goes back through the Bosphorous, the Dardanelles, the Mediterranean, the Straits of Gibraltar, and heads south again, for the coast of Africa. A new months later, here comes the *Zamość* again, back to Bordeaux with a hold full of zebra hides or something. Then, on north and turn east again and back to Danzig, passing every inspection with utter innocence."

"Only the name has been changed to protect the guilty," Lord Darcy remarked.

"You are so right. I won't ask how you knew."

"It was obvious. Tell me: Were the crew allowed liberty at port?"

The Lord High Admiral grinned through his beard. "Not likely, eh? No, they weren't. And would it surprise you to know that the hull of a *Meilic*-class vessel looks astonishingly like that of a light cruiser? I thought not."

Lord Darcy said: 'I see what you mean by the Shells-and-Pea game. It

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means that three different ships are involved. Number One—the *Zamość*—is a genuine merchantman. But when it gets to Odessa, there's a heavily-armored light cruiser hull that looks exactly like her, with the name *Zamość* lettered neatly on her bow and stern. Her cargo is heavy naval guns, ready to be mounted in some shipyard in Africa.. Where?"

"Abidjan, we think."

"The Ashanti, eh? Well, well, anyhow, the second *Zamość*, with the same officers, but a different crew, gets by the Greeks easily because they can't board and search. Off she goes to Abidjan, where the third *Zamość*, another genuine merchantman, is waiting. Same officers; third crew. And back to Danzig as pure as the snows of Pamir. Clever. And what happens to the original *Zamość*?"

"Why, pretty soon the *Berdichev* comes sliding down the ways. Brand new ship. Says so in her papers."

"And this has happened three times?"

"Three times that we know of," said the Lord High Admiral. "We still haven't been able to check out every one of those ships and follow their official courses, much less try to deduce their *un*official shenanigans. The point is that we have to put a stop to it immediately."

"There is evidence," Prince Richard said, "that two more will be sailing out of the Black Sea within the week. They're stepping up operations, my lord. That's why all the worry about that damned missing diplomatic case. It has already been signed by Kyril, but he won't act on it until he sees the Imperial Seal and my signature on it. There's an official letter with it from His Majesty, signed, sealed, and everything, authorizing my own signature as proxy, and all that. It was done that way because the King my brother cannot come to Normandy at this time, and it would take just enough extra time to get the thing over there and back that we would be skating too close to the edge. Two—or even one more of King Casimir's ships out of the blockade could mean more trouble than we can handle right now.

"The Napoli Express leaves Calais in—" He pushed back the lace at his cuff and looked at his wristwatch. "—five hours and twenty-one minutes. That train only runs twice a week. If we can put that treaty on it in Paris, it will be in Brindisi in less than thirty-six hours. From there to Athens by ship is another twenty-four hours. The Basileus will be there, waiting for it, and the Greek Navy will be enforcing it in another twenty-four.

"If we don't have it on that train, we're lost."

"I don't think it's as bad as all that, Your Highness," the Lord High Admiral said. "We can get it to—"

But the Duke cut him off sharply. "Don't be an optimistic fool, my lord! If we haven't found that thing by then, it will mean that somehow—I don't know how—it has come into the hands of the *Serka*.

"Kyril trusted and liked Vauxhall. With him dead, we'd find it hard going to re-negotiate the treaty. Kyril would think us fools to lose the first copy, and he'd be right. He'd likely balk at signing another. Besides, Casimir would know all about it and be taking steps to do something else."

It was not until that point that Lord Darcy realized how much on edge the Prince was. Outbursts of that kind were not like him..

"I think you need not worry yourself unduly on that score, Your High-

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ness," he said quietly. "I beleive I can guarantee that the treaty will be on the Napoli Express in the morning." He knew he was sticking his neck out, and he knew that the axe blade was sharp. But he had that feeling . . .

The Prince took a deep breath, held it for a second, then eased it out. "I am relieved to hear that, my lord. I have never known you to be wrong on something of that kind. Thank you."

Lord Darcy felt a ghostly prickle at the back of his neck. The axe had grown a bit more solid.

"Well, wherever it is," said the Lord High Admiral, "it is not here with the vegetation. I guess the library's next."

They slid aside the double doors and went in.

And stopped.

The room was wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling with bookshelves. And they were full of books.

"Help us, Blessed Mary," Prince Richard said earnestly. "We'll have to look behind every one of them."

"Just a moment, Your Highness; let me check something," said Lord Darcy. He went over to the doors that led back into the front room and slid them open. Master Sean was over by the fireplace, talking in low tones with Journeyman Torquin. Coronel Danvers was sipping a drink and staring moodily out the front window. There was no sign of either Dr. Pateley or the body. Three heads turned as Lord Darcy opened the doors.

"I see the clay has been removed," Lord Darcy said.

"Aye, me lord," Master Sean said. "The hearse came. The doctor went along to make arrangements for the autopsy. I made all the tests possible for now."

"Excellent. Tell me, my good Sean, how long would it take you—possibly with the assistance of your colleague—to remove all the privacy spells around here so that an ordinary clairvoyant could find what we're looking for?"

Master Sean blinked, then looked at Goodman Torquin. "Are any of these yours?"

Torquin shook his head. "Not much good at that sort of thing, Master. Locks are my specialty. I don't know who he got to renew his privacy spells."

Master Sean looked around and seemed to feel the air. "They've been here a long while, me lord. Fifty years or so—give or take ten percent. Strong; well reinforced. Complex, too. Fine, competent workmanship. Master grade, I'd say—or a specialist. Ummm." He reached down, opened his symbol-decorated carpetbag, and took out a thin silver wand with a flat, five-pointed star on the end, looking rather like a long nail with a five-pointed head. He closed his eyes and twirled it slowly between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "Some of the basics are even older. This house is new, but the grounds have been private property for centuries. There was a castle up on the hill where the manor house is now, but it was torn down in the Fifteenth Century. But they had good, solid privacy spells, even then. And the more modern ones are built on an old, very solid foundation."

He opened his eyes and returned the wand to his bag. "Nine hours, my lord—if I'm lucky."

Lord Darcy sighed. "Forget it. Thank you very much, Master Sean." He slid the doors shut again.

"It was a nice idea while it lasted,"

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said the Lord High Admiral. "Let's get on with it."

"I suggest," Lord Darcy said, "that we give it a quick look and then go on to the dining room and the other bedroom. We can come back here if we don't find it there, but we'd feel silly if we pulled out all these books and then found it in the bath of the front bedroom."

A quick search revealed nothing.

"Dining room, then," Lord Darcy said, opening the sliding doors. "Well! What have we here?"

There was a large, bare table of polished walnut, big enough to seat ten, set lengthwise in the room. At the southern end, near the door to the front room, was an open bottle of wine and an empty glass. Lord Darcy went over and looked at them carefully. "*Schwartzschlosskellar* '69. A very good Rhenish. One drink gone, and the bottle's abominably warm. Bottom of the glass still has a sticky drop or two in it."

"His last drink," said Prince Richard.

"I think so, yes. Leave them alone; we'll have Master Sean look them over later, if it becomes necessary."

They found nothing in the dining room.

The front bedroom was very like the rear one, except that the wallpaper pattern was green and silver.

"Notice the way the bedrooms are separated," Lord Peter remarked. "Only a partition between them, but you have to go through at least two other rooms to go from one to the other. Vauxhall had a fine and very subtle sense of psychology."

"That's why he became a diplomat," said the Duke.

There was no diplomatic case in the bedroom, either.

"Back to the library," muttered the Lord High Admiral.

It took them nearly an hour, even with the help of Master Sean, Goodman Torquin, and the Coronel. They found all sorts of little odds and ends about, but nothing of importance. Certainly no Roumeleian naval treaty.

"Well, Your Highness," said the Coronel, "if it's not in this house, it must be outside, eh? Just you wait, though; one of my lads will turn it up. Old Vauxhall probably dropped it somewhere between here and the manor house. That's where I set my sharpest lads to work. I know it's disappointing, though. Tell you what! Let's all have a good stiff drink. Do us no end of good after all that dusty work. What say?"

With the exception of the two sorcerers, everybody agreed with him, for once.

They were all standing around silently, holding their glasses, or staring at walls, when a knock came at the front door, followed immediately by the entrance of Lord Sefton, the Foreign Secretary.

He was perspiring, which gave an oily look to his red, jowly face. "Ah! Your Highness, my lords, gentlemen. Thought I'd find you here." He glanced quickly at the men, not knowing any of them but the Duke and the Lord High Admiral. Prince Richard made introductions.

"Just dropped down to tell Your Highness that the Armsmen have finished searching the house. Haven't found the blasted thing, so Chief Donal is having them go over it all again. Looking for secret panels and the like. I thought maybe you'd found it here."

"No such luck," Prince Richard said. He looked at Lord Darcy. "How about that, my lord? Should we look

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for secret panels?"

Lord Darcy shook his head. "I've looked. Wallpapered walls like this don't lend themselves to such things. There's no way to hide the crakes. Everywhere they *could* be, I checked. I'm going to go out to the gallery again and look behind the pictures, though; if there are any secret hiding places, that's where they'll be."

"Well, then, Lord Darcy," Lord Sefton said importantly, "have you determined who committed the murder?"

"Good God!" Coronel Danvers almost dropped his glass. "*Murder*? What murder?" He jerked his head around to look at Lord Darcy. "You didn't say anything about a murder. Has there been a murder? What the devil is the fellow talking about?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Lord Darcy. "Nobody's said anything about a murder. What *are* you talking about, Lord Sefton?"

"Yes," said Prince Richard, "please explain yourself, my lord."

Lord Sefton's flabby mouth opened, closed, and opened again. "Wuh—wuh—why, Lord *Vauxhall*! I saw him through the window when you called me down! He was right there! With a gun in his hand! Looked like an Egyptian mummy!" He stopped, swallowed, then, more calmly: "Oh. Was it suicide, then?"

Lord Darcy looked at the Duke. "You know, Your Highness, I think that might explain the gun, I believe he was thinking of it—before he died."

"I think you're right," the Duke said solemnly. "He might have thought it would be an easier way to go. Perhaps it would have been. It might have been less—painful."

Master Sean shook his head. "'Tisn't painful, Your Highness. Except mentally. Seeing yourself go all to pieces that way. But the nervous system goes pretty fast. Numbness sets in quite rapidly toward the last."

Lord Sefton seemed ready to go to pieces himself. "Buh—buh—but what are you talking about? Chief Donal said Vauxhall'd been killed by Black Magic! Why are you all taking it so calmly? *Why*?"

"My lord, please calm yourself and sit down," Prince Richard said firmly.

"Yes, my lord, do sit down," said the Coronel. "Here, let me fetch you a glass of brandy. Straighten you right up."

Lord Sefton took the brandy with a shaking hand. "I don't understand," he said weakly.

"Perhaps Master Sean would be good enough to explain," said His Highness.

Master Sean thought for a couple of seconds, then said: "How old would you say Lord Vauxhall was, my lord?"

"Thuh—thirty. Thirty-five."

"He was over seventy," said Master Sean.

Sefton said nothing. He just looked stunned.

"These days, thanks to modern healing methods," Master Sean went on, "a man can expect the Biblical threescore-and-ten as a minimum, if accident or other violence doesn't carry him off before that. Because of the tremendous psychic burdens they bear, Kings don't get much past that, but an ordinary fellow can look forward with reasonable confidence to his hundredth birthday, and a quarter of a century more is far from uncommon. We call a man in his sixties 'middle-aged', and quite rightly, too.

"But Healers and sorcerers aren't miracle-workers. We can all expect to get older; there's no cure for that. A

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man slows down; his reflexes aren't what they were; he gets wrinkles and gray hair and all that sort of thing. We all know it, and we expect it. And, until about a century ago—a little more—there was nothing could be done about it.

"Then, in 1848, in the early part of the reign of Gwiliam v, two medical thaumaturgists, working independently, discovered a method for retaining the appearance and the vigor of youth. One was a Westphalian named Reinhardt von Horst; the other an Ulsterman named Duivid Shea.

"Essentially, what they discovered was a method of keeping the entire body in balance, as it were. I'll not go into the thaumaturgical terminology, but what happens, under the effect of the treatment, is that the body keeps katabolism and anabolism so perfectly balanced that each part contributes to the support of every other part. Do you see?"

Lord Sefton nodded and held his empty glass out to Coronel Danvers, who promptly refilled it along with his own.

Lord Darcy had heard Master Sean lecture on this subject before, but he enjoyed listening to Master Sean when he got into his pedagogical mood. For one thing, he lost almost all of his brogue, and for another, he always showed a new facet of any subject, no matter how many times he'd spoken on it before.

"Now, that sounds awfully good in theory, doesn't it, my lord?

"Unfortunately, it doesn't work out that way. Take the skin, for instance. It's one of the first things to go as age progresses. That's why we get wrinkles and gray hair. The skin loses its youthful elasticity and its ability to pigment hair. The heart, on the other hand, is one of the toughest organs we have. It has to be. It keeps going, day and night, year after year, with only a tiny bit of rest between beats. If a man sees his Healer regularly, the old ticker will keep going strong until the very end. It can be the last thing to go, long after the rest of the body has given up and, to all intents and purposes, died.

"But this treatment I've been talking about spreads the wearing-out process all over the whole body evenly. In order to keep such things as the purely cosmetic functions of the skin going, the heart, the liver, the pancreas, and so on, all have to give up some of their own life expectancy.

"Eventually, the body reaches the point where every organ in it, every individual cell, is on the verge of death. And when they begin dying, it happens all over, with terrifying rapidity. A matter of minutes, never more than an hour. Everything goes at once. The enzymes go wild. Connecting fibers dissolve. Resistance to microorganisms vanishes.

"Well—you saw the result. Lord Vauxhall had taken that treatment."

"*Ugh*," Lord Sefton said. "That's horrible."

"In effect," Master Sean continued relentlessly, "what Lord Vauxhall did was trade fifty extra years of life for fifty extra years of youth. All of us who knew him suspected it, and it came as no surprise—only as a shock."

"Great God," Lord Sefton said. "A man like Vauxhall, tied in with Black Magic. Horrible."

"Well, now, as to that," said Master Sean, "it is and it isn't. Black Magic, I mean. It's not done with evil intent. No ethical thaumaturgist in the Empire would do it, but I understand it's

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not considered a bad exchange in some parts of Islam. Leading the sex life of an eighteen-year-old for half a century might appear to some as a good thing. Depends on your outlook, I suppose. But the end is pretty messy."

"Tell me, Master Sean," Prince Richard said, "How many treatments does it take?"

"Oh, you have to take the treatments regularly, Your Highness. It's like an addictive drug, in a way. After a certain length of time, the withdrawal symptoms are pretty bad. The whole body has been weakened, you see, and without the support of additional spells you'd go to pieces. And more slowly. If Lord Vauxhall had stopped, say, twenty-five years ago, he might have lasted a year. But it would have been a rather horrible year.

"In the long run, of course, there's nothing a sorcerer can do. I have heard that some sorcerers using the treatment have had patients collapse and die in the middle of a treatment session. I don't think I'd care for that, meself."

"Why have I never heard of this before?" Lord Sefton asked.

"It's rarely done," Master Sean said. "Few magicians *can* do it; even fewer *would* do it. And it's a devilish difficult job. Accordingly, the price is high. Very high. Only a rich man like Lord Vauxhall could afford it. And, o' course, it's not widely advertised. We'd rather it were not discussed very much, if you follow me, Lord Sefton."

"I do indeed." The Foreign Secretary drained his glass, and then sat blinking for a minute. At last he said: "Poor old boy. Bad way to go." He forced a smile. "Damned inconvenient, too. For us, I mean. What do you suppose he did with the treaty?" He looked up at Lord Darcy.

LORD DARCY had been thumbing tobacco into what he called his "knock-about briar" and drawing it alight. He slowly blew out a cloud of smoke and said: "Welll—let's reconstruct what he must have done.

"He left the table where my lords had been talking in order to get the leather diplomatic case to put the papers in. While he was gone, he received some sign that the end was near. What would that be, Master Sean?"

"Probably his hair started coming out, me lord," the stout little Irish sorcerer replied. "That's usually the first indication. Then the skin around the eyes. And a sudden feeling of lassitude and weakness."

"We can picture the scene, then," Lord Darcy went on. "I don't know how I, personally, would react if I suddenly saw myself going like that, but Vauxhall was a pretty tough-minded man and he had known what the end would be like for years. He was prepared for it, in a way. But at the moment of realization, everything else became suddenly unimportant. He didn't want others to see him; his vanity precluded that. What went through his mind?

"Lord Vauxhall's greatest conquests were made in the field of diplomacy, but many of his most pleasurable ones were made right here in this house. He had built it himself and was proud of it and happy with it. I think he wanted to see it one last time. He could die here in peace.

"I think the gun must have been in a desk drawer or the like; we can check that later, up at the manor. It's of no matter, really, except that it shows his state of mind.

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"We can imagine him making his decision and coming down here. The important thing we must imagine is what he might have done with that leather-encased treaty. He had, I think, forgotten about it. There it was, under his left arm or in his left hand, and he didn't even notice it. Like a man who has shoved his spectacles up to his forehead and forgotten them."

"Why do you say his left hand, my lord?" Prince Richard asked with a frown.

"Because he was thinking about his right hand," Lord Darcy said gently. "There was a handgun in it."

The Duke nodded silently.

"Now, at some time between then and the moment of his death, he *did* notice it—and put it down somewhere. I hardly think he deliberately concealed it. He had suddenly noticed it and it was rather heavy, so he unburdened himself of it.

"He came here, poured himself a glass of wine, and—"

Lord Darcy stopped.

"The wine," he said after a half minute.

"What about it?" Lord Peter asked. "Perfectly good wine, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes. But he wouldn't drink a Rhenish warm. He wouldn't keep it in a place where it would become warm. Oh, it's warm now, but it was cool when he opened it. Had to be."

He turned away from them suddenly and looked out the front window at the wanly moonlit scene. "I can't picture it," he said, almost as if to himself. "I just can't see him coming down that slope with a bottle of wine, a gun, and a diplomatic case. Even if he left the case in the manor house, would he have gone all the way down to the cellar for a bottle? No. It would have to be picked up on the way—" He swung round and looked at the Prince.

"Were the four of you drinking wine this evening?"

"No, my lord," said Prince Richard. "Oh, there was Oporto and Xerez on the sideboard with the spirits, but nothing that would have been brought up from the wine cellar."

"Then where the devil did he get that bottle of Rhenish?"

Prince Richard put his hand over his eyes with a sudden gesture. "I forgot all about it! There's a small cellar right here. Come! I'll show you."

They all trooped after him, through the dining room, back to the service pantry. He strode over to one wall and knelt on the parquet floor. Lord Darcy saw that there was a small, finger-sized hole in one of the wooden blocks that made up the floor and mentally cursed himself for not having seen it before.

The Duke stuck his finger in the hole and lifted. A block of the wood came up. Beneath it was a heavy steel ring which lay flat until His Highness grasped it and lifted as he stood up. The ring made a handle, and a twenty-eight by twenty-eight section of the floor swung upward on hinges. Below, a ladder led down into gloom.

Lord Darcy was already getting a candle from the supply he had noticed when the room had been searched previously. He lit it with his pipe lighter, and, pipe clenched between his teeth, descended into the little wine cellar.

Once on the floor of the underground room, he lifted his candle and looked around.

"Not much here," he said after a minute. "Most of the shelves are empty. A few good reds. And, yes, seven bottles of the *Schwartzschlosskellar* '69 and a couple

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of dozen of the '70. Want to come down and help me look, Peter? There's a candle here in a holder—probably the one Vauxhall used. It looks fresh."

The Lord High Admiral came down the ladder as if he were on a ship.

The men above waited with what can only be called stolid impatience. After what seemed a God-awful long time, they heard:

"Well, Darcy, so much for that."

"Yes. Nothing here. Dammit, where *is* it?"

The two men came back up the ladder looking utterly dispirited.

"A fine big buildup to a big letdown," Lord Darcy said. "Sorry, Your Highness." They all went back to the front room.

Once there, Coronel Danvers went over to the liquor cabinet, finished his drink, picked up his dragoon officers' cap, adjusted it smartly on his head, turned, and saluted His Highness the Duke.

"With Your Highness' permission, I'll go out and take a look around between here and the manor house. I'm getting a bit fidgety waiting for someone else to find that package."

"Certainly, Coronel. Let me know immediately you find it."

"I shall, Your Highness." And he went briskly out the door.

"Amazing man, the Coronel," said the Duke.

"A good officer," said the Lord High Admiral. "What he needs is to see some action. Which he may, if we don't find that treaty."

"I believe I'll go with him," said Lord Sefton. "Maybe I can be of some help. I'm of no use hanging about here. With your permission, Your Highness?"

"Of course, my lord."

He went out, leaving Lord Darcy with the Prince, the Lord High Admiral, Master Sean, and Goodman Torquin.

"Well," Lord Darcy said with a sigh, "I suppose there's nothing for it but to look behind all the pictures in the gallery. I wish I knew what rooms Vauxhall actually went to."

"Why, he went to all of 'em, ye know," said Torquin.

Lord Darcy looked down at the small man. "He did?"

"Oh, yea. Took a complete tour of the house, he did. The locks had just been freshly serviced by myself d'ye see, so I could tell when I opened 'em. Nobody but him had been in the house since. Funny thing—he went through every door once. And only once. Unlocked the door, went through, locked it behind him. Extraordinary. Must have wanted the house left in tip-top form, eh?"

There seemed to come a great calm over Lord Darcy as he said: "Yes. Most interesting. May I see that sketch plan again?"

"Of course, my lord." Goodman Torquin took his notebook from his bag, extracted the page, and handed it over.

Lord Darcy scrutinized it carefully, then handed it back with a brief thanks. Then he wandered about the room, staring straight ahead as if he were looking at something others could not see. No one said anything. After a few minutes, he stopped suddenly and looked at Prince Richard. "I trust that the plumbing is functioning in this house, Your highness?"

"I should think so. Like the gas, it's turned on from outside, and the servants would have made everything ready for him when they were told he was coming home."

"That's good. If you will pardon me, gentlemen?" He opened the door

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to the west of the fireplace and went into the front bedroom, closing the door behind him.

"He's a deep 'un, his lordship, eh, Master?" said Torquin the Locksman.

"Probably the most brilliant deductive reasoner on the face of the Earth," Master Sean said. "And possibly the most brilliant *in*ductive reasoner. I wonder what he saw in that sketch plan of yours? He saw something. I know him well."

"Let's take a look and see if we can spot it," Prince Richard said. "I think we have all the evidence he has. If he's come up with some kind of answer, we should be able to."

"As my friend Torquin, here, might say, 'Would ye care to put a gold sovereign on it?' " Master Sean said with a grin.

"No," said His Royal Highness.

The four men looked at the sketch plan.

They were still looking fruitlessly when Lord Darcy returned some minutes later. The smile on his face was beatific.

"Ah, Your Highness! You will be pleased to know that your worries are over! All is well! I predict—" He raised a forefinger histrionically. "I predict that very soon a man you have not seen for some time will appear in this very house, coming from the legendary direction of Hell itself, bearing with him that which you seek. He and his minions will come from the darkness into the light. I have spoken!"

The Duke stared at him. "How do you know all this?"

"Aha! I have heard voices, though I could not see the speakers," Lord Darcy said mysteriously.

"What's the matter with you, Darcy?" the Prince asked warily.

Lord Darcy spread his arms and bowed. "I am like the weather, Highness. When the weather is brisk, I am brisk; when the weather is cool, I am cool; when the weather is blustery, I am blustery. Have you noticed how balmy it is out tonight?"

"All right, my lord; you know something. What is it?" the Lord High Admiral said in quarterdeck tones.

"Indeed, I do," Lord Darcy said, regaining some of his wonted composure. "Take a good look at that sketch plan, I beg you. And remember that Torquin the Locksman has stated unequivocally that Lord Vauxhall went through each and every one of the sixteen doors in this house—we're not counting bathroom doors—once and only once. Do I state the facts, my good Torquin?"

"Yea, my lord; ye do."

"Then the facts lead inescapably to one conclusion, which, in turn, leads us to the most likely place for the treaty to be. Don't you see?"

They didn't, none of them, for a minute or so.

Then Lord Darcy said quietly: "How did he get into the house?"

Torquin the Locksman looked at him in astonishment. "Through one of the outside doors, o' course. He had all the keys."

But Master Sean burst out with: "Good heavens, yes! Parity, me lord. *Parity!*"

"Exactly, me dear Sean! Parity!" Lord Darcy said.

"I don't get it," the Lord High Admiral said flatly. "What's 'parity'?"

"The ability to make pairs, yer lordship," said Master Sean. "In other words, is a number odd or even? The number of doors coming into this house is four—that's even. If we went through all four of those doors once and only once—it don't matter at all

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where he went between times—he'd have ended up back outside the house."

"In-out-in-out," said Prince Richard. "Why, of course he would! Then how—" He stopped and looked back at the paper.

"Would you give me a sheet of blank paper and a pencil?" Lord Darcy asked in a low aside of Torquin. The small man produced them from his bag.

"Is the route he took supposed to be of importance?" the Lord High Admiral asked.

"Not the route, no," Lord Darcy said. He had put the paper on the mantelpiece and was sketching rapidly. "There must be ten thousand different routes he could have taken and still gone through every door exactly once. No, the route's not important."

"Parity, again," said Master Sean. "It holds true for any room with an even number of doors. I see what his lordship is driving at."

"Certainly you do," Lord Darcy said. "Once I saw that he couldn't have entered from any of the outside doors, I knew that there had to be a secret entrance to this house. It fits in well with Vauxhall's romantic nature. And when I saw what the end-points of his route through this house were, I knew where to look for the hidden entrance. So I excused myself, and went to look. I didn't want to raise any false hopes in the rest of you, so I checked to make sure the treaty was there."

"You said you were going to the head," said the Lord High Admiral.

"I did not. I merely inquired after the plumbing. Your inferences were your own. At any rate, I checked, and I heard voices from—"

A voice from within the house said: "Halloo! Is someone up there?"

"Come along," Lord Darcy said. "That will be Chief Donal with good news. I left the treaty for him to find." They all went through the dining room to the service pantry. Chief Donal and two of his sergeants were climbing out of the little wine cellar.

The Chief Master-at-Arms was holding a heavy leather diplomatic case in his hands and a broad smile on his face. "We found it, Your Highness! There you are!" He had never looked less grim.

The Duke took the case and inspected its contents. "That's it, all right, Chief Donal. Congratulations. And thank you. Where was it?"

"Well, we got to looking for secret panels, Your Highness, since the first search of the house didn't yield anything. We found this old tunnel behind a dummy wine rack in the wine cellar. There used to be an old castle up on that hill, centuries ago, and the manor house was built on its foundations. This tunnel must have been an escape route for times of siege; it ended up down here, in what was woods, then. Lord Vauxhall must have deliberately built this house on top of the old tunnel exit. We followed it and came out here. The case, there, was on the floor of the tunnel, just behind another dummy wine rack that acted as a door."

"Well, thank you again, Chief Donal," the Prince said. "You can go call off your men now. We've got what we were looking for."

They all went back out to the receiving room again, and, after the Armsmen had left, Prince Richard speared Lord Darcy with an accusing eye. " 'A man I haven't seen in some time'," he quasi-quoted.

"A couple of hours, at least," Lord

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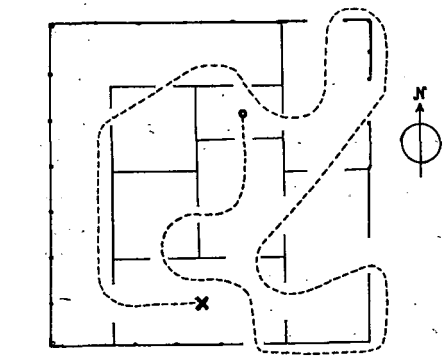
Darcy said tranquilly.

"May I ask what is on the piece of paper you were so assiduously working on?"

"Certainly, Your Highness. Here. As you see, it is merely one of the



possible routes Vauxhall could have taken. There are thousands of possibilities, but every one of them has to either start in this room and end in the service pantry or vice versa. They are the only two rooms with an odd number of doors. Since he died in this room, he had to start his tour in the service pantry. And the only other way into that room had to be through the wine cellar."

"Simple, when you know how," the Duke said. "It's getting very late. I still have to tell Coronel Danvers to call off his dragoons. Let's shut off the lights and—if you would be so good, Journeyman Torquin—lock up those four outside doors."

"And the ones to the greenroom, Your Highness," the small man said firmly. "Lord Vauxhall wouldn't want no gardener prowlin' through the house."

"Of course."

The doors were locked and the lights put out.

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As Lord Darcy turned the last gas-cock in the front room, he looked at the spot before the fireplace where Lord Vauxhall had died.

"*Obit surfeit vanitatis,*" he said softly.

And the darkness came.

—RANDALL GARRETT

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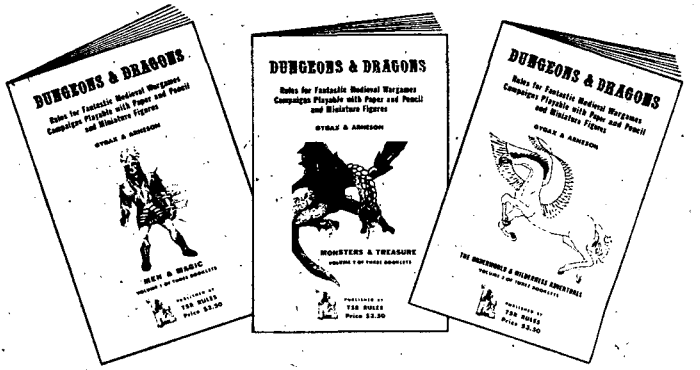

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Robert Thurston's most recent story for us was "The Haunted Writing Manual" (October, 1975). Now he returns with a story about a former political activist and—

ONE MAGIC RING, USED

ROBERT THURSTON

Illustrated by Joel Pollack

1

SYLVIA DOUBTED the powers of my magic ring and bracelet. She never said so right out, and in fact always listened intently to the story of their origins, but I could see in her eyes that she imagined herself to be playing along with a game. A goddamned game was all it was to her, maybe that was why everything got so screwed up. I could almost accept that as a legitimate explanation, if I were able to figure out the god or gods or whatever behind the powers of the ring and bracelet.

I am able to wish people dead with the ring. All I have to do is rub the ring and they die. But the neat trick is the bracelet (a plain, manly bracelet, by the way, nothing faggy about it at all). A bit of rubbing on the bracelet and they are alive again. Usually I wish them alive again.

Just now, when I saw Martin driving through the gateway (proudly polluting everything in sight with that massive sleek vehicle), I did the magic number with the old ring and Martin's car swerved immediately. Right through the raggedly-sculptured shrubbery, across the balding lawn, smash through a benchful of senior citizens, up and down the hills of the three-hole golf course. Increasing speed, the car headed for the cast-iron statue of this institution's founder. Bouncing off it, the car spun tires in a patch of mud, then made for the statue again. This time the vehicle tilted upward at impact and began to climb the founder's front, breaking off chips of his Edwardian trousers. Some damage done to the cast-iron crotch. Then the car stopped its ascent, slid sideways across waistcoat and jacket, flipped over and changed into a pool of fire while it fell to the ground. I could see Martin hanging from the wreckage before the flames consumed him.

When I was about five years old, I offended my brother's sensibilities in some way. He was six years older than I and always eager to take offense. He selected a stone from among the many that rested on our nearly-barren front lawn and threatened me with it.

"You don't take that back and I clobber you with this," he whispered. In those days he hardly ever spoke normally, for fear somebody might hear what he was saying. A practice which, incidentally, has served him quite well in his political career.

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"I don't take nothin' back," I of course shouted. "And you wouldn't dare throw that."

"Oh, yeah, wouldn't I? Better take that back."

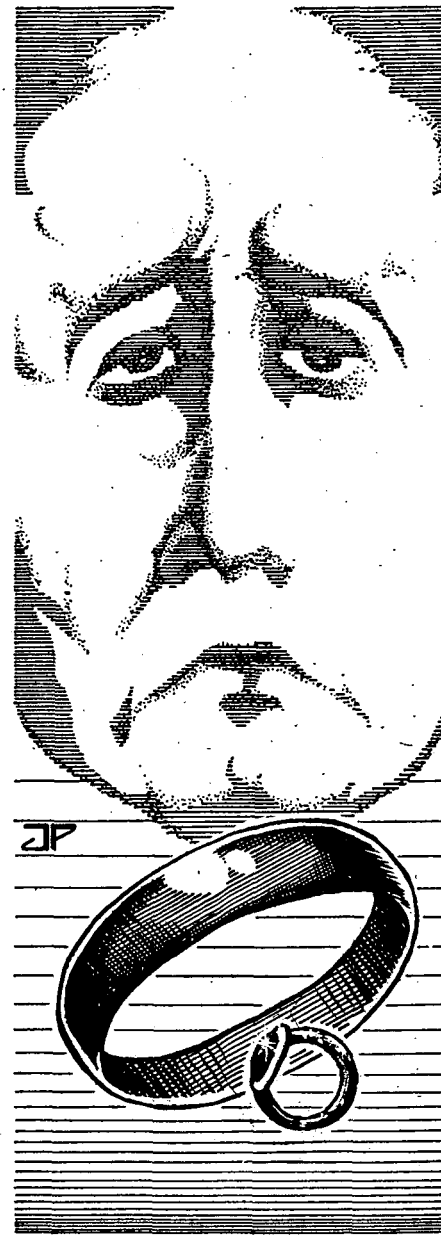
I stuck out my tongue and he threw the rock. I did not dodge fast enough and it caught me on the side of the head. Four stitches. And everybody believed Martin's version—that it was an accident. That's when I learned to take Martin at his word.

I twisted the bracelet and the fire went out and the car flipped upward and then down the statue, restoring its pieces of clothing and perhaps its masculinity, and backwards across the golf course and lawn and senior citizens and bench and shrubbery, back to the road again where it resumed its vindictive journey towards me. This part, resurrection, was no longer any fun, in the same way that running a film backwards becomes tiresome with repetition.

Martin seemed dazed when he got out of the car. He shook his arms, straightened his legs, gave his body a long narcissistic look to verify that all his trim beauty was still connected and unharmed. I've done this to him so many times, it's a wonder he suspects nothing.

2

IF HE KNEW about its powers, Martin would grab the ring. He'd need it only a few seconds. Enough time to rub it and see what kind of unpleasant death would come to me. The bracelet, however, would frighten him. He would back away from it, his eyes reflecting witches' cauldrons and devil dolls. He would cross himself with garlic three times, he would drop to his knees and pronounce aloud the few words of Hail Mary he



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remembers. The bracelet is, after all, a torture device. It restores the victim to life, to his normal life—with apparently no memory of the death, but perhaps a vague feeling of wrongness, of something bad just ending.

Martin could wear the ring with his usual cool urbanity. And he could kill. He is a decorated Viet Nam vet and, legend has it, a superb killer. Maybe you have heard the speech, the off-hand recollection which he drops into his let's-keep-a-level-head views on foreign policy.

"There I was," he says, adopting a tone which suggests that he's never told this story in public before, "sneaking my usual afternoon snooze in our barracks at Da Nang, dreaming of my wife Linda. I always dreamt of Linda during my tour of duty there. But I was snatched from my wife's loving arms with the damnedest explosion I ever heard. Well, the noise was so loud because it was a shell bursting in the very barracks where I was snitching my nap. The building itself was burned to the ground after I narrowly escaped by diving through a nearby window. I'll never know how I miraculously avoided being injured by flying debris or shrapnel, and I can only thank God for it, but I bounced to my feet unwounded. And damned mad, I can tell you. For the next few minutes I was not in control of my anger. You might think it comic for a politician to admit a moment of not having things under control—my good friend and colleague Mr. Mills might have something to say on that subject—but I think in these days we must be honest about how turmoil and war affect the operations of the most normal of psyches. Anyway, to digress back to my original digression—" (He always draws nervous laughter at this point.) "—before I knew it, I was outside the patrol area around the base and heading into bush country, where the Cong flourished as well as the native marijuana. Somehow, I'd picked up one of my men's M-16's—I never did find out whose it was—and, not to unduly dramatize the matter, flushed a nest of the enemy, began blasting, and wound up killing about half a dozen of them. I did not realize the extent of my killings until I returned to my senses. Which leads me back to the point I want to make about—"

Martin was not primarily a combat specialist. Most of his time in Indochina he was an interrogator. It is a job he will not talk about, a job for which he never finds anecdotes in his speeches, a job that frosts his eyes when you mention it. As I say, he would be terrified of the bracelet.

His visit is the usual crap.

Are you happy here?

Are they treating you well?

When will you be able to come home?

Don't look at me like that, we really want you back.

Linda is dying to take care of you.

I wish you'd quit this pretense and come back to normal.

Your doctor said you mentioned Sylvia to him.

Did you?

Talk to me.

Please.

After some repetitions, end of litany, end of visit.

Goodbye Martin. The only words I ever say. Just as he reaches the doorway. In fact, most of the time now he stops there to wait for them. I have been prolonging my silence before the words. Goodbye Martin. I can see chill in his shoulders. He sincerely hates me at this moment. He used to protest, beg me to say something

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more. Now he just says So long, Andy, and leaves.

At the elevator, once he thinks he's free of me, his nerves show. His arms swing and he clenches and unclenches his hands. Even his legs seem to twitch involuntarily.

The first day we came here he sat in a squeaking chair and stared across the room at me slouching on an institutional leather couch.

"I don't want to do this." His voice sought the level at which he delivered sincere position statements to his audience.

"Don't do it then."

"I have to. Everybody says I have to."

"Linda, too?"

"No, Linda says bring you home and she'll take care of you."

"I'll take care of her, that's what'll happen. That's why you won't do that."

"I trust you."

"Funny, you never did before."

"If you would only stop the personal vilifications—"

"I can't help it when you stand in front of me with a rock in your hand."

He did not seem to understand the reference to the rock. I suppose he genuinely did not remember.

The elevator doors open and he takes one last apprehensive look at me. He has so often been the victim of my ring, perhaps he suspects what will happen next. The elevator doors slide shut, and I rub the ring. Descending screams, and the elevator crashes. I wait until the last moan ends to rub the bracelet. Then I run to the window and watch Martin leave. Again he seems to be inspecting himself to see if anything, after all, is missing.

3

SYLVIA'S CHIEF ABILITY was acceptance. She accepted anything and everything. My love, my intellectual posing, my anger, my need to be comforted. Perhaps she was not bright. Perhaps, even though her conversation fascinated me and her knowing eyes told tall tales, she was not bright. An intelligent person could not have stayed with me.

I first saw Syl in the second row of a choir. The Concordia Choir of Moorhead, Minnesota. Standing in a line of wholesome girls in blue robes, she seemed decidedly adventurous. And, when they sang "Be Not Afraid," she looked quite afraid. I stared at her all through the concert—I was not too keen on hymns, anyway, and only went to concerts for which I got free tickets—and made extensive plans for our future.

Backstage, I confronted her and generally got in her way. She thought I was obnoxious.

"I am, but I don't let that stand in the way of getting what I want."

"And how do you get what you want?"

"Magic."

By that I did not mean the ring and bracelet since I had not received them yet. I just meant magic.

"And you want me to just follow you out of here?"

"Would I lie to an angel in a blue choir robe?"

"Goodness, you haven't the first idea what kind of line to use on a girl."

"I don't get you."

"And you won't unless you drop that out-of-style chic phrasing."

"Tell me how to approach you then."

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"It doesn't matter."

"What doesn't matter?"

"Your approach. I've got to get the hell out of here anyway. I'll come with you. Wait'll I turn in the robe."

After we had made love, she told me she would have done anything to get away from religious music.

"And Minnesota."

SHE NEVER returned to Minnesota or religious music, but she did sing Bach on wintry days. She stayed and worked her own magic on me, making me presentable to the world, changing my fits of anger into frivolous playacting, my madness into eccentricity. The only way I could ever wreck her composure was to sit and twist my magic ring.

We ran together a long way. First there was school and then the movement, where violent words badgered my weak voice into its present rasp. I could make speeches with the best of them, invest my tired slogans with a rage whose pretense only Sylvia saw. Afterward we made out in dark rooms and shared the joy of the power we had wielded during the day. Power used with an almost repulsive calculation. We thought we needed to do it like that—to serve the beliefs that seemed so right, so necessary. Martin claims that our methods were reprehensible. He has judged me in a voice meant to fill an auditorium. I can't argue with him. Losers lose that privilege.

IN THE MIDDLE of a riot I rubbed the ring and the pigs charged, spattering bullets among us. Many of our people slumped to the ground. Blood everywhere. On the faces of some policemen, horror. On others, glee. We got some of them, too—shooting with illicit guns (enough "specials" to make Saturday night a movement holiday), thrusting with knives, charging with broken bottles. The din rose steadily to an overriding shriek, and I rubbed the bracelet. Knives came out of bodies, bullets returned to their weapons, corpses began to breathe and stood up. The police backed awkwardly away, the meanness slowly relaxing out of their faces. It was the best reversal my magic had ever brought me.

Then the movement died, without anybody touching any rings. Maybe die isn't quite the right word. Maybe self-burial. An unobtrusive self-burial, so nobody could hear the shovel digging into the earth. We endured recession and freeze and hard times and depression. We endured the joyless unmasking of our enemies and a shade more rudeness in the people who didn't like us. We endured.

I stopped using the ring and bracelet for a while. As it was, I had not very often used the power importantly. I had destroyed, then resurrected a presidential candidate and a few other public figures. I had performed ritual murder on several colleagues. Some innocuous entertainment figures, especially Las Vegas comics, were victims in my idle time.

Sylvia and I traveled around the country, visiting our movement friends (whose bodies were visibly folding), and trying to talk to the new generation of young people with their secret smiles and their supercilious politeness, but we could not revive anything. We became anachronisms in a time that was supposed to be ours. We roamed the streets and ran up to anybody with long hair and scruffy clothing. All that traveling, all that frustration wore us down. We flopped onto motel room and dormitory beds and stared at late night TV

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and watched all those people hawking all those record albums—Rosemary Clooney and Johnny Mathis and Chubby Checker. (Just today, on the color TV that Martin sent me, I was offered "The Greatest Music the World Has Ever Known . . . The Golden Hits of the Platters.")

SYLVIA HAD BEEN looking at me for a long time. I knew that, and put a little extra into my grunts and gestures. Her eyes were wide-open, her stare concentrated, as if she were watching a flip-flopping test pattern. The harsh light of the motel bedside lamp was intent on robbing her of her beauty, taking it away by changing her complexion to sallow, throwing angry shadows to remove softness and form, spotlighting flaws. With the thumb and first two fingers of my right hand I idly stroked the ring finger of my left. A sharp intake of breath from Sylvia.

"Why so twitchy?" I finally said. She began blinking her eyes, as she always did when she wanted to start a serious conversation. What she thought was a serious conversation.

"I don't know, I'm having trouble coping. I can take so much being dumped on and then I want to rip and claw, you know? Andy, why don't we have any power? Why haven't we ever been able to get any power?"

"I have power," I said and started moving my magic ring back and forth across the knuckle of my finger.

"Oh, yeah, you have power. That's why we're on this goddamned good will tour, testing the temperatures of cold shoulders in various regions of this fair land. You got power to—"

"I got power to shut you up."

"Ah, fuck."

Syl was almost crying. Unconsciously she buttoned and unbuttoned the top two or three buttons of her workshirt, revealing almost all of her small tits at each unbuttoning. The gesture, repeated often, made me think of a videotape loop advertising a peep show. She seemed, annoyingly, like a child.

I raised my hand to my face, ran the back of my ring finger along the line of my chin. She watched the movement intently, then shrugged.

"I guess," she said, resigning, "power's always what somebody else's got."

She took my hand, careful to avoid touching the ring, and guided it to her unbuttoned shirt. She straightened her back to give the illusion of extra inches to her bosom. I pushed against a nipple with the palm of my hand, imagined pushing the tit back into her chest, transforming the right side of her into a boy. She gently pried away my hand and led it downward to the fly-buttons of her levis.

"Make me forget, Andy," she said. "I have *got* to forget them for a while."

A LETTER from Martin.

"Linda wants you to think about, *consider*, a holiday visit. You can come. You can leave there any time you choose, nobody is keeping you. You are wasting the goddamned royalties from your book, just for fancy care and a haven in which to feel sorry for yourself. The money won't keep rolling in, you know. The hardcover's been remaindered. Publisher says the paperback is not doing as well as they expected. Time passes, fashions change, books date. Yours, I'm afraid, was a best-seller of its time, but the time is gone. You can do so much. Please, please come to us. There is so much we can do for

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you! If not for Thanksgiving, at least for the week surrounding Christmas. Be sensible, Andy. There's still a rumbling in the land and you can help do something about it. The two of us can do something together. I am sending you some new underwear and a couple of shirts by separate cover,

"love,

"Martin

"P. S. Me, too—Linda (love, that is, not underwear and shirts)."

What should I tell him? That if I'm around long enough I will definitely kill him, and this time no resurrection? I'd be there for just a day or so at Christmas and, sure enough, I would have Santa come down the chimney with a sackful of napalm. Bits of Martin and Linda hanging from bits of the Christmas tree. And Goodbye Forever, Martin and Linda.

Screw you, Martin. And may the electorate continue to bless you as you climb the ladder of success. Or fill the bladder of success.

Five or six years ago Martin came to me and begged me to lay off, give this country, this world, a chance.

"You know what tearing down does? Tearing down leaves rubble. All you can do with rubble is climb around in it and raise dust. Pull away boards and trash the wreckage futher. We don't want that, either one of us. Be positive, Andy. Build up, don't tear down."

I laughed at him, invoked his voting record, made vomit rise to his throat and gag him to death. Even after I had resurrected him and he had left, the stink from his insides lingered in the room.

OUTSIDE, the pall has lifted and it is an abnormal bright autumn day. All the freaks are out on the lawn, frolicking, dancing mad dances to Pan. Volleyball and frisbie-ing. Begging to be taken on long walks. They asked me to come out and join the fun, but I pulled my famous catatonic act.

I rub my ring and cracks appear in the ground. They widen quickly, and the freaks run for cover.

Sylvia died on a day like this. The sun streamed in through the sections of window that were not covered by crusted-in dirt. Syl had just made a pitcherful of orange koolaid, and we were sitting on the living room floor drinking it from tall glasses whose sides pictured Sesame Street characters. She wore one of my old turtlenecks. Stitched onto it was a drawing on cloth of David Susskind, frowning. Syl had done both the drawing and the stitching, she was very clever that way.

"Tell me again about the ring and bracelet," she said.

Leaning close to her, I began the tale in a hoarse whisper:

"I was walking through Penn Station on a dark and gloomy night. The mist-stretched in front of me in all directions, from Off-Track Betting across the Amtrack windows to the Horn and Hardart . . ."

"Horn and Hardart," Syl said. She liked to echo certain phrases of the story.

"Suddenly, emerging from this dense fog came a dark and mysterious man. A tall man he was, flitting from phone booth to phone booth checking the coin return openings with his long thin index finger. Feeling the usual disquiet of a foggy night in Penn Station, I quickly glanced away from the fellow and, on my assigned errand, proceeded onward."

"Proceeded onward."

"From behind me I heard the ominous clickety-clack of approaching footsteps. The man from the phone

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booths, I knew at once. The rhythm of his footsteps told me he was walking faster than I, and catching up, so I began to walk faster. My walking faster only made him walk faster. 'Excuse me, sir,' he suddenly said, so close that his breath sent ripples through the long hair I had at the time. 'Get away,' I said, 'I am sorry but I have no money to spare. Hustle a rich person for a change.' He clamped a hand onto my shoulder and I felt panic all through my body. My hair didn't just stand on end, it went rigid with paralysis . . ."

"Rigid with paralysis."

"I looked around for a cop but of course there wasn't a single one in sight. In the thick fog I could see no further than the overhanging arrival-departure board. 'Young man,' my tall assailant said, 'young man, I do not hustle. Hustling is a dodge for living, the ultimate swindle since it is a con of one's self. I am an opportunist, a grabber of life, a plunger into the great stream of life . . .' 'More like a plunger in the great toilet bowl of life,' I said. 'You could not be more worng. I would not hustle you. I wish merely to make a deal, a deal which, incidentally, serves you more than me.' 'Oh, sure,' I said, 'you will give me a good deal. Sure, and the sky will fall, and the Coca Cola company will manufacture nonerotic bottles, thus serving the ecology and moral rearmament movements simultaneously, and . . .' 'No, no,' he said, 'I am on the level. I don't screw my own kind.' "

"My own kind."

"Laughing at him, I tried to walk on, but his hold on my shoulder was tight. I looked back at him. The fog not only surrounded him, it was in his face and eyes. His features were so indistinct they seemed in the midst of constant change. With his free hand he reached into his suitcoat pocket, scrounged around in it for a long time, as if separating out the old matchbooks, lint, candy wrappers to get at what he wanted. When he had them, the hand reemerged and he shoved its contents into my hand. At first the two items felt gritty and a bit slimy, attributes caused more by my frame of mind than the thin globules of crusted matters still clinging to the jewelry. 'These objects I give you of my own free will and in a sound mind,' he shouted while staring beyond me as if there were someone else in the deserted station to whom he could address his remarks. 'They are no longer mine and I willingly give up all title to them and the powers inherent in them. All debts are cancelled, I am no longer responsible. Heavens protect me!' "

"Protect me."

"He released his hold on me and backed away. His eyes had terror in them as if I'd been molesting him instead of the other way around. 'What shall I do with these?' I asked, looking at my hand for the first time and seeing the ring and bracelet. 'They are yours.' 'But they appear to be valuable, don't you want anything for them?' 'If you are satisfied with them, leave a little spare change in the coin returns for me.' And he disappeared into the fog."

"Into the fog."

"And it was not long before I learned the properties of my new acquisitions. To be exact, when I wished a bothersome Eighth Avenue prostitute dead of the plague while touching the ring. Immediately she fell feverish at my feet. Panicked, I backed away from her body and inadvertently touched the bracelet, at that moment thinking that I hadn't meant

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her to take my remark literally. The marks of fever disappeared from her brow, and she stood up in an exact reversal of her falling. Careful thought and a long history of supersititon led me to the proper conclusions and an accurate understanding of the uses of the ring and bracelet. And since, I have used the power quite sparingly, intending its use primarily for moral lessons. I have strived to resurrect most of those who have been dealt the ring's death blows."

"The ring's death blows. Would you like more koolaid?"

"Thank you."

Syl looked really good that day, her body all lean and long, her tits making little bumps in David Susskind's forehead. The sunlight, while it emphasized the tilted squalidness of our hovel, shone beautifully upon her, accenting the smoothness and color of her complexion. I was so distracted, so entranced, by her beauty that I forgot my usual caution in regard to the ring. Absentmindedly, perhaps because the gesture had such ritualistic importance to me, I rubbed—really just ran my finger lightly along the golden surface of—the magic ring. I swear I do not remember thinking anything about death. I could not have looked at her and wished her dead. I could not have. I had to see the death in my mind before it could happen, didn't I? I even pulled my hand away as soon as I realized I was touching the ring, but it was too late. Syl had been leaning toward me, pouring koolaid into my glass, when her body stiffened and a faint brief gasp escaped from her. The pitcher dropped from her hand onto the thick carpet. It fell on its side and sent out orange rivulets which quickly became polluted with pieces of the rug's dirt and grit. Syl fell alongside the pitcher, her face white, her eyes seeming to stare at the ring. Falling sideways, she seemed to bounce once, then clumsily sprawl on her back, her arms spread out, her body suddenly relaxed in death.

I stared at her, then at the ring. I'd never used the power with her before, many times with Martin and the others but never with her. I thought of the apologies which I would make so profusely after I'd resurrected her. Apologies, even though she would not remember dying. But she would suspect, I was sure. She would look at my face and the ring and the bracelet, and she would know.

What are you doing just sitting here and staring, I asked myself, get mobile. I reached for the bracelet. Its flat unembossed surface caught some of the sunlight and returned a few gold rays. I touched the bracelet with my ring finger, as I always did, and had started the rubbing before I felt the heat that the bracelet was giving off. I pulled my hand away, my finger already stinging from the burn it had received. Third degree burns, as I would discover later at the hospital. I tried again to touch the bracelet, it was like grabbing a hot pan or pot out of a working oven. I looked over at Syl, still in the same position on the floor. I tried again and again to rub the bracelet, each time receiving searing pain in my hand. Finally, shutting my eyes and stiffening the rest of my body, I clutched at the bracelet and, defying the pain, rubbed it frantically. But, when I opened my eyes, I saw that Syl still was dead. I tore off the bracelet and hurled it to the other side of the room.

When I returned later, after a patronizing intern had treated my burned hand, after Syl had been claimed by vengeful parents who

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branded me with their own type of curses, I found the bracelet where it had landed, ringing one of the many Sylvia-manufactured candles that she had spread haphazardly around the room.

7

SOME OF THE freaks have fallen into the cracks in the earth. Just like in the movie *Green Dolphin Street*. Others cower wherever they have found shelter; they scream each time the earth shakes and the cracks widen.

Taking my hand away from the ring, I use it to dial Martin's number on my bedside phone. His voice sounds sleepy. Guess I've awakened him from a nap.

I cradle the receiver in my shoulder, in order to leave my hands free for the ring and bracelet.

"How are you, Martin?"

"Andy, is that *really* you?"

When I rub the ring this time, the quake is deafening. Something in the distance catches fire.

"No, this is Bobby Kennedy calling from the grave to remind you of your promises to me, Martin."

"Damn, the first time in months I get some words from you, and I've got to put up with this."

"Confess to me, Martin. Confess all your sins. I am giving you a break."

"What the hell are you talking about? Andy, talk to me straight."

"No, you talk to me straight. Tell me your sins and maybe I'll save you. Maybe I'll save everybody. That's it, I'll save everybody, depending on what grade I can give your sins. You better not have C-minues sins, Martin old buddy."

"C-minus is passing, damn it! What are you—"

"No, C-minus is far from passing. I could give the world C-minus for everything I've seen up to now, and I'd call that failing. Confess. Not much time. You should be hearing the rumble in the distance by now."

Outside the world is fire, smoke, and pain. I can see very little detail. My room rocks as the house shakes on its foundations. I stop working the ring and bring my hand close to the bracelet.

"I give up, Andy. I don't think this is a step forward, your talking to me. We're better off with you silent. I'm going to hang up on you."

"No! Don't! Confess. You must."

"Must, hell! You've been telling me what I must or must not do since you made the mistake of thinking yourself past puberty. Well, you don't know. You do not know. I am through knuckling under to you, to your high-handed and farflung rhetoric and rhetorical emptiness. I will not keep peace just to keep you quiet. I am ready to do anything humanly possible for you, but that does not include continuing this conversation. Goodbye, Andy."

"Wait, wait! Thanksgiving, I want to discuss Thanks—"

I listen for a long time to the ridiculous and chaotic sounds inside the receiver, then I relax my shoulders and let it fall. The glass in the window is beginning to crack from the heat of the flames. The smoke is making me cough, and furniture is sliding around the room.

I consider working the bracelet off my wrist and throwing it into a corner of the room. But no. Not even for the freaks. I won't give the bracelet up just yet.

The furniture slides back into place. Smoke is sucked out through the window, which then repairs its bro-

(Cont. on page 57)

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George Martin made his debut in these pages with "Exit to San Breta" (February, 1972). Since then he's made a name for himself as an author of grimly realistic "hard science" stf. Of this story he says, "A fantasy, the first I've done since 'Exit to San Breta' . . . I'm proud of it." Here Martin reveals a new maturity of style and purpose in a lyrical evocation of—

THE LONELY SONGS OF LAREN DORR

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

Illustrated by Steve Fabian

THE IS a girl who goes between the worlds.

She is grey-eyed and pale of skin, or so the story goes, and her hair is a coal-black waterfall with half-seen hints of red. She wears about her brow a circlet of burnished metal, a dark crown that holds her hair in place and sometimes puts shadows in her eyes. Her name is Sharra; she knows the gates.

The beginning of her story is lost to us, with the memory of the world from which she sprang. The end? The end is not yet, and when it comes we shall not know it.

We have only the middle, or rather a piece of that middle, the smallest part of the legend, a mere fragment of the quest. A small tale within the greater, of one world where Sharra paused, and of the lonely singer Laren Dorr and how they briefly touched.

ii.

ONE MOMENT there was only the valley, caught in twilight. The setting sun hung fat and violet on the ridge above, and its rays slanted down silently into a dense forest whose trees had shiny black trunks and colorless ghostly leaves. The only sounds were the cries of the mourning-birds coming out for the night, and the swift rush of water in the rocky stream that cut the woods.

Then, through a gate unseen, Sharra came tired and bloodied to the world of Laren Dorr. She wore a plain white dress, now stained and sweaty, and a heavy fur cloak that had been half-ripped from her back. And her left arm, bare and slender, still bled from three long wounds. She appeared by the side of the stream, shaking, and she threw a quick, wary glance about her before she knelt to dress her wounds. The water, for all its swiftness, was a dark and murky green. No way to tell if it was safe, but Sharra was weak and thirsty. She drank, washed her arm as best she could in the strange and doubtful wa-

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ter, and bound her injuries with bandages ripped from her clothes. Then, as the purple sun dipped lower behind the ridge, she crawled away from the water to a sheltered spot among the trees, and fell into exhausted sleep.

She woke to arms around her, strong arms that lifted her easily to carry her somewhere, and she woke struggling. But the arms just tightened, and held her still. "Easy," a mellow voice said, and she saw a face dimly through gathering mist, a man's face, long and somehow gentle. "You are weak," he said, "and night is coming. We must be inside before darkness."

Sharra did not struggle, not then, though she knew she should. She had been struggling a long time, and she was tired. But she looked at him, confused. "Why?" she asked. Then, not waiting for an answer, "Who are you? Where are we going?"

"To safety," he said.

"Your home?," she asked, drowsy.

"No," he said, so soft she could scarcely hear his voice. "No, not home, not ever home. But it will do." She heard splashing then, as if he were carrying her across the stream, and ahead of them on the ridge she glimpsed a gaunt, twisted silhouette, a triple-towered castle etched black against the sun. Odd, she thought, that wasn't there before.

She slept.

iii.

WHEN SHE WOKE, he was there, watching her. She lay under a pile of soft, warm blankets in a curtained, canopied bed. But the curtains had been drawn back, and her host sat across the room in a great chair draped by shadows. Candlelight flickered in his eyes, and his hands locked together neatly beneath his chin. "Are you feeling better?" he asked, without moving.

She sat up, and noticed she was nude. Swift as suspicion, quicker than thought, her hand went to her head. But the dark crown was still there, in place, untouched, its metal cool against her brow. Relaxing, she leaned back against the pillows and pulled the blankets up to cover herself. "Much better," she said, and as she said it she realized for the first time that her wounds were gone.

The man smiled at her, a sad wistful sort of smile. He had a strong face, with charcoal-colored hair that curled in lazy ringlets and fell down into dark eyes somehow wider than they should be. Even seated, he was tall. And slender. He wore a suit and cape of some soft grey leather, and over that he wore melancholy like a cloak. "Claw marks," he said speculatively, while he smiled. "Claw marks down your arm, and your clothes almost ripped from your back. Someone doesn't like you."

"Something," Sharra said. "A guardian, a guardian at the gate." She sighed. "There is always a guardian at the gate. The Seven don't like us to move from world to world. Me they like least of all."

His hands unfolded from beneath his chin, and rested on the carved wooden arms of his chair. He nodded, but the wistful smile stayed. "So, then," he said. "You know the Seven, and you know the gates." His eyes strayed to her forehead. "The crown, of course. I should have guessed."

Sharra grinned at him. "You did guess. More than that, you knew. Who are you? What world is this?"

"My world," he said evenly. "I've named it a thousand times, but none

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of the names ever seem quite right. There was one once, a name I liked, a name that fit. But I've forgotten it. It was a long time ago. *My* name is Laren Dorr, or that was my name, once, when I had use for such a thing. Here and now it seems somewhat silly. But at least I haven't forgotten *it*."

"Your world," Sharra said. "Are you a king, then? A god?"

"Yes," Laren Dorr replied, with an easy laugh. "And more. I'm whatever I choose to be. There is no one around to dispute me."

"What did you do to my wounds?" she asked.

"I healed them." He gave an apologetic shrug. "It's my world. I have certain powers. Not the powers I'd like to have, perhaps, but powers nonetheless."

"Oh." She did not look convinced.

Laren waved an impatient hand. "You think it's impossible. Your crown, of course. Well, that's only half right. I could not harm you with my ah, powers, not while you wear that. But I can help you." He smiled again, and his eyes grew soft and dreamy. "But it doesn't matter. Even if I could I would never harm you, Sharra. Believe that. It has been a long time."

Sharra looked startled. "You know my name. How?"

He stood up, smiling, and came across the room to sit beside her on the bed. And he took her hand before replying, wrapping it softly in his and stroking her with his thumb. "Yes, I know your name. You are Sharra, who moves between the worlds. Centuries ago, when the hills had a different shape and the violet sun burned scarlet at the very beginning of its cycle, they came to me and told me you would come. I hate them, all Seven, and I will always hate them, but that night I welcomed the vision they gave me. They told me only your name, and that you would come here, to my world. And one thing more, But that was enough. It was a promise. a promise of an ending or a start, of a change. And any change is welcome on this world. I've been alone here through a thousand sun-cycles, Sharra, and each cycle lasts for centuries. There are few events to mark the death of time."

Sharra was frowning. She shook her long black hair, and in the dim light of the candles the soft red highlights glowed. "Are they that far ahead of me, then?" she said. "Do they know what will happen?" Her voice was troubled. She looked up at him. "This other thing they told you?"

He squeezed her hand, very gently. "They told me I would love you," Laren said. His voice still sounded sad. "But that was no great prophecy. I could have told them as much. There was a time long ago—I think the sun was yellow then—when I realized that I would love *any* voice that was not an echo of my own."

iv.

SHARRA WOKE at dawn, when shafts of bright purple light spilled into her room through a high arched window that had not been there the night before. Clothing had been laid out for her; a loose yellow robe, a jeweled dress of bright crimson, a suit of forest green. She chose the suit, dressed quickly. As she left, she paused to look out the window.

She was in a tower, looking out over crumbling stone battlements and a dusty triangular courtyard. Two other towers, twisted matchstick things with pointed conical spires,

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rose from the other corners of the triangle. There was a strong wind that whipped the rows of grey pennants set along the walls, but no other motion to be seen.

And, beyond the castle walls, no sign of the valley, none at all. The castle with its courtyard and its crooked towers was set atop a mountain, and far and away in all directions taller mountains loomed, presenting a panorama of black stone cliffs and jagged rocky walls and shining clean ice steeples that gleamed with a violet sheen. The window was sealed and closed, but the wind *looked* cold.

Her door was open. Sharra moved quickly down a twisting stone staircase, out across the courtyard into the main building, a low wooden structure built against the wall. She passed through countless rooms, some cold and empty save for dust, others richly furnished, before she found Laren Dorr eating breakfast.

There was an empty seat at his side; the table was heavily laden with food and drink. Sharra sat down, and took a hot biscuit, smiling despite herself. Laren smiled back.

"I'm leaving today," she said, in between bites. "I'm sorry, Laren. I must find the gate."

The air of hopeless melancholy had not left him. It never did. "So you said last night," he replied, sighing. "It seems I have waited a long time for nothing."

There was meat, several types of biscuits, fruit, cheese, milk. Sharra filled a plate, face a little downcast, avoiding Laren's eyes. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

"Stay a while," he said. "Only a short time. You can afford it, I would think. Let me show you what I can of my world. Let me sing to you." His eyes, wide and dark and very tired, asked the question.

She hesitated. "Well . . . it takes time to find the gate. Stay with me for a while, then. But Laren, eventually I must go. I have made promises. You understand?"

He smiled, gave a helpless shrug. "Yes. But look. I know where the gate is. I can show you, save you a search. Stay with me, oh, a month. A month as you measure time. Then I'll take you to the gate." He studied her. "You've been hunting a long, long time, Sharra. Perhaps you need a rest."

Slowly, thoughtfully, she ate a piece of fruit, watching him all the time. "Perhaps I do," she said at last, weighing things. "And there will be a guardian, of course. You could help me then. A month . . . that's not so long. I've been on other worlds far longer than a month." She nodded, and a smile spread slowly across her face. "Yes," she said, still nodding. "That would be all right."

He touched her hand lightly. After breakfast, he showed her the world they had given him.

They stood side by side on a small balcony atop the highest of the three towers, Sharra in dark green and Laren tall and soft in grey. They stood without moving, and Laren moved the world around them. He set the castle flying over restless churning seas, where long black serpent-heads peered up out of the water to watch them pass. He moved them to a vast echoing cavern under the earth, all aglow with a soft green light, where dripping stalactites brushed down against the towers and herds of blind white goats moaned outside the battlements. He clapped his hands and smiled, and steam-thick jungle rose around them; trees that climbed each other in rubber ladders

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to the sky, giant flowers of a dozen different colors, fanged monkeys that chittered from the walls. He clapped again, and the walls were swept clean, and suddenly the courtyard dirt was sand and they were on an endless beach by the shore of a bleak grey ocean, and above the slow wheeling of a great blue bird with tissue-paper wings was the only movement to be seen. He showed her this, and more; and more, and in the end as dusk seemed to threaten in one place after another, he took the castle back to the ridge above the valley. And Sharra looked down on the forest of black-barked trees where he had found her, and heard the mourning-birds whimper and weep among transparent leaves.

"It is not a bad world," she said, turning to him on the balcony.

"No," Laren replied. His hands rested on the cold stone railing, his eyes on the valley below. "Not entirely. I explored it once, on foot, with a sword and a walking stick. There was a joy there, a real excitement. A new mystery behind every hill." He chuckled. "But that, too, was long ago. Now I know what lies behind every hill. Another empty horizon."

He looked at her, and gave his characteristic shrug. "There are worse hells, I suppose. But this is mine."

"Come with me, then," she said. "Find the gate with me, and leave. There are other worlds. Maybe they are less strange and less beautiful, but you will not be alone."

He shrugged again. "You make it sound so easy," he said in a careless voice. "I have found the gate, Sharra. I have tried it a thousand times. The guardian does not stop me. I step through, briefly glimpse some other world, and suddenly I'm back in the courtyard. No. I cannot leave."

She took his hand in hers. "How sad. To be alone so long. I think you must be very strong, Laren. I would go mad in only a handful of years."

He laughed, and there was a bitterness in the way he did it. "Oh, Sharra. I have gone mad a thousand times, also. They cure me, love. They always cure me." Another shrug, and he put his arm around her. The wind was cold and rising. "Come," he said. "We must be inside before full dark."

They went up in the tower to her bedroom, and they sat together on her bed and Laren brought them food; meat burned black on the outside and red within, hot bread, wine. They ate and they talked.

"Why are you here?" she asked him, in between mouthfuls, washing her words down with wine. "How did you offend them? Who were you, before?"

"I hardly remember, except in dreams," he told her. "And the dreams—it has been so long, I can't even recall which ones are truth and which are visions born of my madness." He sighed. "Sometimes I dream I was a king, a great king in a world other than this, and my crime was that I made my people happy. In happiness they turned against the Seven, and the temples fell idle. And I woke one day, within my room, within my castle, and found my servants gone. And when I went outside, my people and my world were also gone, and even the woman who slept beside me.

"But there are other dreams. Often I remember vaguely that I was a god. Well, an almost-god. I had powers, and teachings, and they were not the teachings of the Seven. They were afraid of me, each of them, for I was a match for any of them. But I could

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not meet all Seven together, and that was what they forced me to do. And then they left me only a small bit of my power, and set me here. It was cruel irony. As a god, I'd taught that people should turn to each other, that they could keep away the darkness by love and laughter and talk. So all these things the Seven took from me.

"And even that is not the worst. For there are other times when I think that I have always been here, that I was born here some endless age ago. And the memories are all false ones, sent to make me hurt the more."

Sharra watched him as he spoke. His eyes were not on her, but far away, full of fog and dreams and half-dead rememberings. And he spoke very slowly, in a voice that was also like fog, that drifted and curled and hid things, and you knew that there were mysteries there and things brooding just out of sight and far-off lights that you would never reach.

Laren stopped, and his eyes woke up again. "Ah, Sharra," he said. "Be careful how you go. Even your crown will not help you should they move on you directly. And the pale child Bakkalon will tear at you, and Naa-Slas feed upon your pain, and Saagael on your soul."

She shivered, and cut another piece of meat. But it was cold and tough when she bit into it, and suddenly she noticed that the candles had burned very low. How long had she listened to him speak?

"Wait," he said then, and he rose and went outside, out the door near where the window had been. There was nothing there now but rough grey stone; the windows all changed to solid rock with the last fading of the sun. Laren returned in a few moments, with a softly shining instrument of dark black wood slung around his neck on a leather cord. Sharra had never quite seen its like. It had sixteen strings, each a different color, and all up and down its length brightly-glowing bars of light were inlaid amid the polished wood. When Laren sat, the bottom of the device rested on the floor and the top came to just above his shoulder. He stroked it lightly, speculatively; the lights glowed, and suddenly the room was full of swift-fading music.

"My companion," he said, smiling. He touched it again, and the music rose and died, lost notes without a tune. And he brushed the light-bars and the very air shimmered and changed color.

He began to sing.

I am the lord of loneliness,
Empty my domain . . .

. . . the first words ran, sung low and sweet in Laren's mellow far-off fog voice. The rest of the song—Sharra clutched at it, heard each word and tried to remember, but lost them all. They brushed her, touched her, then melted away, back into the fog, here and gone again so swift that she could not remember quite what they had been. With the words, the music; wistful and melancholy and full of secrets, pulling at her, crying, whispering promises of a thousand tales untold. All around the room the candles flamed up brighter, and globes of light grew and danced and flowed together until the air was full of color.

Words, music, light; Laren Dorr put them all together, and wove for her a vision.

She saw him then as he saw himself in his dreams; a king, strong and tall and still proud, with hair as black as hers and eyes that snapped. He was dressed all in shimmering white, pants that clung tight and a shirt that

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ballooned at the sleeves, and a great cloak that moved and curled in the wind like a sheet of solid snow. Around his brow he wore a crown of flashing silver, and a slim, straight sword flashed just as bright at his side. This Laren, this younger Laren, this dream vision, moved without melancholy, moved in a world of sweet ivory minarets and languid blue canals. And the world moved around him, friends and lovers and one special woman whom Laren drew with words and lights of fire, and there was an infinity of easy days and laughter. Then, sudden, abrupt; darkness. he was here.

The music moaned; the lights dimmed; the words grew sad and lost. Sharra saw Laren wake, in a familiar castle now deserted. She saw him search from room to room, and walk outside to face a world he'd never seen. She watched him leave the castle, walk off towards the mists of a far horizon in the hope that those mists were smoke. And on and on he walked, and new horizons fell beneath his feet each day, and the great fat sun waxed red and orange and yellow, but still his world was empty. All the places he had shown her he walked to; all those and more; and finally, lost as ever, wanting home, the castle came to him.

By then his white had faded to dim grey. But still the song went on. Days went, and years, and centuries, and Laren grew tired and mad but never old. The sun shone green and violet and a savage hard blue-white, but with each cycle there was less color in his world. So Laren sang, of endless empty days and nights when music and memory were his only sanity, and his songs made Sharra feel it.

And when the vision faded and the music died and his soft voice melted away for the last time and Laren paused and smiled and looked at her, Sharra found herself trembling.

"Thank you," he said softly, with a shrug. And he took his instrument and left her for the night.

v.

THE NEXT DAY dawned cold and overcast, but Laren took her out into the forests, hunting. Their quarry was a lean white thing, half cat, half gazelle, with too much speed for them to chase easily and too many teeth for them to kill. Sharra did not mind. The hunt was better than the kill. There was a singular, striking joy in that run through the darkling forest, holding a bow she never used and wearing a quiver of black wood arrows cut from the same dour trees that surrounded them. Both of them were bundled up tightly in grey fur, and Laren smiled out at her from under a wolf's-head hood. And the leaves beneath their boots, as clear and fragile as glass, cracked and splintered as they ran.

Afterwards, unblooded but exhausted, they returned to the castle and Laren set out a great feast in the main dining room. They smiled at each other from opposite ends of a table fifty feet long, and Sharra watched the clouds roll by the window behind Laren's head, and later watched the window turn to stone.

"Why does it do that?" she asked. "And why don't you ever go outside at night?"

He shrugged. "Ah. I have reasons. The nights are, well, not good here." He sipped hot spice wine from a great jeweled cup. "The world you came from, where you started—tell me, Sharra, did you have stars?"

She nodded. "Yes. It's been so

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long, though. But I still remember. The nights were very dark and black, and the stars were little pinpoints of light, hard and cold and far away. You could see patterns sometimes. The men of my world, when they were young, gave names to each of those patterns, and told grand tales about them."

Laren nodded. "I would like your world, I think," he said. "Mine was like that, a little. But our stars were a thousand colors, and they moved, like ghostly lanterns in the night. Sometimes they drew veils around them to hide their light. And then our nights would be all shimmer and gossamer. Often I would go sailing at startime, myself and she whom I loved. Just so we could see the stars together. It was a good time to sing." His voice was growing sad again.

Darkness had crept into the room, darkness and silence, and the food was cold and Sharra could scarce see his face fifty long feet away. So she rose and went to him, and sat lightly on the great table near to his chair. And Laren nodded and smiled, and at once there was a whooosh, and all along the walls torches flared to sudden life in the long dining hall. He offered her more wine, and her fingers lingered on his as she took the glass.

"It was like that for us, too," Sharra said. "If the wind was warm enough, and other men were far away, then we liked to lie together in the open. Kaydar and I." She hesitated, looked at him.

His eyes were searching. "Kaydar?"

"You would have liked him, Laren. And he would have liked you, I think. He was tall and he had red hair and there was a fire in his eyes. Kaydar had powers, as did I, but his were greater. And he had such a will. They took him one night, did not kill him, only took him from me and from our world. I have been hunting for him ever since. I know the gates, I wear the dark crown, and they will not stop me easily."

Laren drank his wine and watched the torchlight on the metal of his goblet. "There are an infinity of worlds, Sharra."

"I have as much time as I require. I do not age, Laren, no more than you do. I will find him."

"Did you love him so much?"

Sharra fought a fond, flickering smile, and lost. "Yes," she said, and now it was her voice that seemed a little lost. "Yes, so much. He made me happy, Laren. We were only together for a short time, but he *did* make me happy. The Seven cannot touch that. It was a joy just to watch him, to feel his arms around me and see the way he smiled."

"Ah," he said, and he did smile, but there was something very beaten in the way he did it. The silence grew very thick.

Finally Sharra turned to him. "But we have wandered a long way from where we started. You still have not told me why your windows seal themselves at night."

"You have come a long way, Sharra. You move between the worlds. Have you seen worlds without stars?"

"Yes. Many, Laren. I have seen a universe where the sun is glowing ember with but a single world, and the skies are vast and vacant by night. I have seen the land of frowning jesters, where there is no sky and the hissing suns burn below the ocean. I have walked the moors of Carradyne, and watched dark sorcerers set fire to a rainbow to light that sunless land."

"This world has no stars," Laren said.

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"Does that frighten you so much, that you stay inside?"

"No. But it has something else instead." He looked at her. "Would you see?"

She nodded.

As abruptly as they had lit, the torches all snuffed out. The room swam with blackness. And Sharra shifted on the table to look over Laren's shoulder. Laren did not move. But behind him, the stones of the window fell away like dust and light poured in from outside.

The sky was very dark, but she could see clearly, for against the darkness a shape was moving. Light poured from it, and the dirt in the courtyard and the stones of the battlements and the grey pennants were all bright beneath its glow. Puzzling, Sharra looked up.

Something looked back. It was taller than the mountains and it filled up half the sky, and though it gave off light enough to see the castle by, Sharra knew that it was dark beyond darkness. It had a man-shape, roughly, and it wore a long cape and a cowl, and below that was blackness even fouler than the rest. The only sounds were the Laren's soft breathing and the beating of her heart and distant weeping of a mourning-bird, but in her head Sharra could hear demonic laughter.

The shape in the sky looked down at her, in her, and she felt the cold dark in her soul. Frozen, she could not move her eyes. But the shape did move. It turned, and raised a hand, and then there was something else up there with it, a tiny man-shape with eyes of fire that writhed and screamed and called to her.

Sharra shrieked, and turned away. When she glanced back, there was no window. Only a wall of safe, sure stone, and a row of torches burning, and Laren holding her within strong arms. "It was only a vision," he told her. He pressed her tight against him, and stroked her hair. "I used to test myself at night," he said, more to himself than to her. "But there was no need. They take turns up there, watching me, each of the Seven. I have seen them too often, burning with black light against the clean dark of the sky, and holding those I loved. Now I don't look. I stay inside and sing, and my windows are made of night-stone."

"I feel . . . fouled," she said, still trembling a little.

"Come," he said. "There is water upstairs, you can clean away the cold. And then I'll sing for you." He took her hand, and led her up into the tower.

Sharra took a hot bath while Laren set up his instrument and tuned it in the bedroom. He was ready when she returned, wrapped head to foot in a huge fluffy brown towel. She sat on the bed, drying her hair and waiting.

And Laren gave her visions.

He sang his other dream this time, the one where he was a god and the enemy of the Seven. The music was a savage pounding thing, shot through with lightning and tremors of fear, and the lights melted together to form a scarlet battlefield where a blinding-white Laren fought shadows and the shapes of nightmare. There were seven of them, and they formed a ring around him and darted in and out, stabbing him with lances of absolute black, and Laren answered them with fire and storm. But in the end they overwhelmed him, the light faded, and then the song grew soft and sad again and the vision blurred as lonely dreaming centuries flashed by.

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Hardly had the last notes fallen from the air and the final shimmers died then Laren started once again. A new song this time, and one he did not know so well. His fingers, slim and graceful, hesitated and retraced themselves more than once, and his voice was shaky too, for he was making up some of the words as he went along. Sharra knew why. For this time he sang of her, a ballad of her quest. Of burning love and endless searching, of worlds beyond worlds, of dark crowns and waiting guardians that fought with claws and tricks and lies. He took every word that she had spoken, and used each, and transformed each. In the bedroom, glittering panoramas formed where hot white suns burned beneath eternal ocean and hissed in clouds of steam, and men ancient beyond time lit rainbows to keep away the dark. And he sang Kaydar, and he sang him true somehow, he caught and drew the fire that had been Sharra's love and made her believe anew.

But the song ended with a question, the halting finale lingering in the air, echoing, echoing. Both of them waited for the rest, and both knew there was no more. Not yet.

Sharra was crying. "My turn, Laren," she said. Then: "Thank you. For giving Kaydar back to me."

"It was only a song," he said, shrugging. "It's been a long time since I had a new song to sing."

Once again he left her, touching her cheek lightly at the door as she stood there with the blanket wrapped around her. Then Sharra locked the door behind him and went from candle to candle, turning light to darkness with a breath. And she threw the towel over a chair and crawled under the blankets and lay a long long time before drifting off to sleep.

It was still dark when she woke, not knowing why. She opened her eyes and lay quietly and looked around the room, and nothing was there, nothing was changed. Or was there?

And then she saw him, sitting in the chair across the room with his hands locked under his chin, just as he had sat that first time. His eyes steady and unmoving, very wide and dark in a room full of night. He sat very still. "Laren?" she called, softly, still not quite sure the dark form was him.

"Yes," he said. He did not move. "I watched you last night, too, while you slept. I have been alone here for longer than you can ever imagine, and very soon now I will be alone again. Even in sleep, your presence is a wonder."

"Oh, Laren," she said. There was a silence, a pause, a weighing and an unspoken conversation. Then she threw back the blanket, and Laren came to her.

vi.

BOTH OF THEM had seen centuries come and go. A month, a moment; much the same.

The slept together every night, and every night Laren sang his songs while Sharra listened. They talked throughout dark hours, and during the day they swam nude in crystalline waters that caught the purple glory of the sky. They made love on beaches of fine white sand, and they spoke a lot of love.

But nothing changed. And finally the time drew near. On the eve of the night before the day that was end, at twilight, they walked together through the shadowed forest where he'd found her.

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Laren had learned to laugh during his month with Sharra, but now he was silent again. He walked slowly, clutched her hand hard in his, and his mood was more grey than the soft silk shirt he wore. Finally, by the side of the valley stream, he sat and pulled her down by his side. They took off their boots and let the water cool their feet. It was a warm evening, with a lonely restless wind and already you could hear the first of the mourning-birds.

"You must go," he said, still holding her hand but never looking at her. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," she said, and the melancholy had touched her too, and there were leaden echoes in her voice.

"My words have all left me, Sharra," Laren said. "If I could sing for you a vision now, I would. A vision of a world once empty, made full by us and our children. I could offer that. My world has beauty and wonder and mystery enough, if only there were eyes to see it. And if the nights are evil, well, men have faced dark nights before, on other worlds in other times. I would love you, Sharra, as much as I am able. I would try to make you happy."

"Laren. . . ," she started. But he quieted her with a glance.

"No, I could say that, but I will not. I have no right. Kaydar makes you happy. Only a selfish fool would ask you to give up that happiness to share my misery. Kaydar is all fire and laughter, while I am smoke and song and sadness. I have been alone too long, Sharra. The grey is part of my soul now, and I would not have you darkened. But still . . ."

She took his hand in both of hers, lifted it, and kissed it quickly. Then, releasing him, she lay her head on his unmoving shoulder. "Try to come with me, Laren," she said. "Hold my hand when we pass through the gate, and perhaps the dark crown will protect you."

"I will try anything you ask. But don't ask me to believe that it will work." He sighed. "You have countless worlds ahead of you, Sharra, and I cannot see your ending. But it is not here. That I know. And maybe that is best. I don't know anymore, if I ever did. I remember love vaguely, I think I can recall what it was like, and I remember that it never lasts. Here, with both of us unchanging and immortal, how could we help but to grow bored? Would we hate each other then? I'd not want that." He looked at her then, and smiled an aching melancholy smile. "I think that you had known Kaydar for only a short time, to be so in love with him. Perhaps I'm being devious after all. For in finding Kaydar, you may lose him. The fire will go out some day, my love, and the magic will die. And then you may remember Laren Dorr."

Sharra began to weep, softly. Laren gathered her to him, and kissed her, and whispered a gentle "No." She kissed back, and they held each other worldless.

When at last the purple gloom had darkened to near-black, they put back on their boots and stood. Laren hugged her and smiled.

"I *must* go," Sharra said. "I *must*. But leaving is hard, Laren, you must believe that."

"I do," he said. "I love you *because* you will go, I think. Because you cannot forget Kaydar, and you will not forget the promises you made. You are Sharra, who goes between the worlds, and I think the Seven must fear you far more than any god I

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might have been. If you were not you, I would not think as much of you."

"Oh. Once you said you would love any voice, that was not any echo of your own."

Laren shrugged. "As I have often said, love, *that* was a very long time ago."

They were back inside the castle before darkness, for a final meal, a final night, a final song. They got no sleep that night, and Laren sang to her again just before dawn. It was not a very good song, though; it was an aimless, rambling thing about a wandering minstrel on some nondescript world. Very little of interest ever happened to the minstrel; Sharra couldn't quite get the point of the song, and Laren sang it listlessly. It seemed an odd farewell, but both of them were troubled.

He left her with the sunrise, promising to change clothes and meet her in the courtyard. And sure enough, he was waiting when she got there, smiling at her calm and confident. He wore a suit of pure white; pants that clung, a shirt that puffed up at the sleeves, and a great heavy cape that snapped and billowed in the rising wind. But the purple sun stained him with its shadow rays.

Sharra walked out to him and took his hand. She wore tough leather, and there was a knife in her belt, for dealing with the guardian. Her hair, jet black with light-born glints of red and purple, blew as freely as his cape, but the dark crown was in place. "Goodbye, Laren," she said. "I wish I had given you more."

"You have given me enough. In all the centuries that come, in all the suncycles that lie ahead, I will remember. I shall measure time by you, Sharra. When the sun rises one day and its color is blue fire, I will look at it and say, 'Yes, this is the first blue sun after Sharra came to me.' "

She nodded. "And I have a new promise. I will find Kaydar, some day. And if I free him, we will come back to you, both of us together, and we will pit my crown and Kaydar's fires against all the darkness of the Seven."

Laren shrugged. "Good. If I'm not here, be sure to leave a message," he said. And then he grinned.

"Now, the gate. You said you would show me the gate."

Laren turned and gestured at the shortest tower, a sooty stone structure Sharra had never been inside. There was a wide wooden door in its base. Laren produced a key.

"Here?" she said, looking puzzled. "In the castle?"

"Here," Laren said. They walked across the courtyard, to the door. Laren inserted the heavy metal key and began to fumble with the lock. While he worked, Sharra took one last look around, and felt the sadness heavy on her soul. The other towers looked bleak and dead, the courtyard was forlorn, and beyond the high icy mountains was only an empty horizon. There was no sound but Laren working at the lock, and no motion but the steady wind that kicked up the courtyard dust and flapped the seven grey pennants that hung along each wall. Sharra shivered with sudden loneliness.

Laren opened the door. No room inside; only a wall of moving fog, a fog without color or sound or light. "Your gate, my lady," the singer said.

Sharra watched it, as she had watched it so many times before. What world was next? she wondered. She never knew. But maybe in the next one, she would find Kaydar.

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She felt Laren's hand on her shoulder. "You hesitate," he said, his voice soft.

Sharra's hand went to her knife. "The guardian," she said suddenly. "There is always a guardian." Her eyes darted quickly round the courtyard.

Laren sighed. "Yes. Always. There are some who try to claw you to pieces, and some who try to get you lost, and some who try to trick you into taking the wrong gate. There are some who hold you with weapons, some with chains, some with lies. And there is one, at least, who tried to stop you with love. Yet he was true for all that, and he never sang you false."

And with a hopeless, loving shrug, Laren shoved her through the gate.

DID SHE FIND HIM, in the end, her lover with the eyes of fire? Or is she searching still? What guardian did she face next?

When she walks at night, a stranger in a lonely land, does the sky have stars?

I don't know. He doesn't. Maybe even the Seven do not know. They are powerful, yes, but all power is not theirs, and the number of worlds is greater than even they can count.

There is a girl who goes between the worlds, but her path is lost in legend by now. Maybe she is dead, and maybe not. Knowledge moves slowly from world to world, and not all of it is true.

But this we know; in an empty castle below a purple sun, a lonely minstrel waits, and sings of her

—GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

One Magic Ring, Used (Cont. from page 43)

ken glass. The fire outside lessens and the cracks in the earth slowly come shut, but not before people pop out of them, as in a trampoline act's finale. They land on their feet and resume their playtime activities. A volleyball is created from a puff of smoke and crosses path with a skimming frisbie. I stop using the bracelet and start up again on the ring. The volleyball recrosses the arc of the frisbie, then explodes. I change to the bracelet. The volleyball is recreated and zooms past the frisbie. I touch the ring. The volleyball drops back and collides with the frisbie. They both catch fire, and the pieces of volleyball float to the ground after the melting frisbie. Back to the bracelet. The frisbie unmelts and the volleyball joins its pieces. Each finishes its journey, into the hands of a waiting freak.

I think I'll call Martin again. Otherwise Linda will stuff the bird with her famous chestnut dressing, and I hate her famous chestnut dressing.

—ROBERT THURSTON

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TWO SUNS SETTING

KARL EDWARD WAGNER

Karl Edward Wagner was the 1975 winner of the August Derleth Award (presented by the British Fantasy Society) for short story with his "Sticks." He makes his debut here with a story about a man, a giant, and their strange quest . . .

Illustrated by Jeff Jones

I. *Alone with the Night Winds*

SULLEN RED DISC, the sun was burying itself beneath a monotonous horizon of rolling gravel waste that stretched behind him miles uncounted—and possibly untrod save by his horse's hooves. Long before the sunlight failed, its warmth was snuffed out in the empty lifelessness of the desert, so that in its last hour the sun shone cheerless as the rising moon. Crimson as it climbed, the full moon seemed a false dawn to mock the dying sun, arriving prematurely, disrespectful as a greedy heir pacing in eager impatience before the master's deathbed. For a space the limitless skies of twilight displayed two rubrous globes low on either horizon, so that Kane mused as to whether his long journey across the desert might not have led him to some strange dusk world where two ancient guns smouldered in the heavens. The region seemed unearthly in its chill desolation—and certainly an aura of unguessable antiquity hung as a grey shadow over each tumbled bit of stone.

Kane had left Carsultyal with no particular destination or goal, other than to ride far beyond that city's influence. There were those who said that Kane was driven from Carsultyal, his power there broken at last by fellow sorcerers jealous of his long held prestige—and alarmed by the bizarrely alien direction his studies had taken in recent years. Kane himself considered his departure more or less voluntary, albeit precipitous, arguing privately that had he really wanted, he could have fended off the attack of his former colleagues—even though he owed allegiance to neither god nor demon from whom he might have sought intercession. Rather, mankind's first great city had grown stagnant over the last century. The spirit of discovery, of renaissance that had drawn him to Carsultyal in its earliest years was burned out now, so that boredom, his nemesis, had overtaken Kane once more. To be sure, he had been restless, his thoughts drawn more and more to the world beyond Carsultyal—lands yet to know the presence of man. But that he returned to his pathless wandering without much forethought could be judged in that Kane had left the city

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with little more than a few supplies, a double handful of gold coins, a fast horse, and a sword of tempered Carsultyal steel. Those who sought to seize his relinquished power may have regretted their inheritance, but this minor vindication seemed pointless now.

With dusk, the wind began to rise, a whining chill breath from the mountains whose rusted peaks still burned with the final rays of the sun, now vanished beneath the opposite horizon. Kane shivered and drew his russet cloak closer about his massive shoulders, regretting the loss of warm furs that scavengers now snarled over in Carsultyal. The Herratlonai was a cold, empty waste, where nights dropped to freezing. With the mountain wind, his outfit of green wool shirt, dark leather vest and pants was less than adequate for the night.

The previous day he had eaten the last hoarded chips of dried fruit and jerky—after short rations for a week or more. Water luckily there was yet half a bag; he had filled the skins to bursting before entering the desert, and a waterhole had providentially appeared along the ghost of a trail he followed. Or thought he followed. The gravel waste southeast of Carsultyal's domains was reputed to border on one of the prehuman realms of lost antiquity. There were tales of cities impossibly ancient buried beneath the gravel dunes. Kane had come upon what he hoped might be traces of a forgotten path across the desert to the fabled mountains of the eastern continent. He determined to follow this, and at times he discovered sentinel boulders whose all but effaced heiroglyphs might resemble those glimpsed in books of elder world lore—or might be the deluding artistry of wind and ice. Beyond this tantalization,

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Kane found nothing further to disrupt the monotonous desolation but stray patches of sparse scrub and gorgeous columns of agatized wood. The grass his mount cropped; for himself Kane had not seen even a lizard in days. Perhaps it had been rash to attempt transverse of a desert whose limits no man had knowledge of, at least without a packtrain of provisions. But Kane had not embarked under the brightest of circumstances, nor had the years dulled his reckless whim. Philosophically he congratulated himself on riding a course no enemy would care to follow.

Then the mountains had broken through the thin haze of the eastern horizon like a row of worn and discolored teeth. Their presence gave some cause for optimism—at least he was across the desert—but this hope was clouded when the late afternoon sun revealed the hills to be merely a more vertical variation on the present terrain. Dry slopes of gravel and crumbling bluffs appeared lifeless except for dark blotches of twisted underbrush. From the talus gleamed iridescent flashes of sunlight, colored then flung back by mammoth slabs of petrified wood, strewn about like a giant's plundered jewel hoard.

But with darkness had also come the startling smell of wood smoke in the mountain wind—a familiar scent uncanny in this stark desolation. Kane brushed smooth the grimy beard that hung like rust over coarse features, thumbed a few blowing strands of red hair back beneath a leather headband sewn with plaques of lapis lazuli—sniffing the night wind of disbelief. His mount paced onward, the night deepened, and against the foot of the mountains ahead beckoned the light of the campfire. No, simply the light of a fire, he mused—there was no reason to be more specific. At this distance it must be a good sized blaze.

He guided his horse closer, picking his way carefully over the gravel in the moonlight. With a twisting ache in his belly, Kane recognized the odor of roasting meat within the smoke, and there was no longer any doubt. Calculatingly he studied the still distant campfire. He had seen no evidence of habitation against the slope, and in the emptiness such would seem an impossibility. Not that it seemed any more probable, but indications were that he had chanced upon some other wanderer. As to who or what might be camped beside the ridge, or what circumstances had brought about his presence, Kane was at loss to conjecture. Nothing was known of those who might dwell beyond the settled northwestern crescent of the Great Southern Continent, and in the dawn world more races than mankind walked the Earth.

Whoever had built the fire, he ate his meat cooked and so could not be hopelessly alien. From the size of the campfire, Kane guessed it was a small party of nomads or savages—likely someone from whatever lay beyond the mountains. The significant point was the roasting meat. Licking dry lips, Kane unfastened his sword from saddle and buckled it across his back, so that the familiar hilt protruded reassuringly over his right shoulder. The scabbard tip he left untied, so that it would pivot freely on its shoulder swivel when he grasped the hilt. Cautiously he approached the campfire.

II. *Two Who Met by Firelight*

HIS KEEN NOSTRILS caught an animal smell, sour beneath the pungency of wood smoke and cooked flesh. At

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first the crackling firelight screened the shape crouched beyond, so that Kane warily nudged his steed toward another angle of vision to confirm his dawning suspicion. His face tightened upon recognition. Only one man squatted beside the blaze—if a giant might be termed "man".

Kane had seen, had spoken with giants in the course of his wanderings, although in recent decades they were seldom encountered. A proudly aloof, taciturn race he knew them to be. Few in number and scornful of mankind's emerging civilization, they lived a semi-barbaric existence in lands unfrequented by man. True, there abounded gruesome tales of individual giants who terrorized isolated human settlements, but these were outlaws to their own race—or more often the monstrous hybrid ogres.

This particular individual did not appear threatening. While he obviously had heard the clash of shod hooves on stone, his attitude seemed curious rather than hostile as Kane approached. Not that someone his stature need display an aggressive front at the appearance of a single horse and rider. In comfortable reach lay a hooked axe whose bronze head could serve as ship's anchor. Kane realized that from the other's higher vantage point, his approach had been observed beyond the ring of firelight. Still the gaint showed no sinister action. Spitted over sputtering flames turned an entire carcass of what looked to be goat. Hot, succulent meat . . .

Hunger overpowered caution. Poised to wheel and gallop away at the first sign of danger, Kane boldly rode up to the fringe of firelit circle and halted.

"Good evening," he greeted levelly, speaking the language of the giant's race with complete fluency. "Your campfire was visible at some distance. I wondered if I might join you."

The giant grunted and shielded his eyes with a hand larger than a spade. "Well, what's this here? A human who speaks the Old Tongue. Out of nowhere too—and in a land that even ghosts have abandoned. This sort of novelty can't be ignored. Come on into the light, manling. We'll share hospitality of the trail." His voice, though loud as a man's shout, had an even bass timbre.

Kane muttered thanks and dismounted, deciding to gamble on the giant's apparent goodwill. As he stopped before the fire, he and his host exchanged curious inspections. At a bit over six feet and carrying past three hundred pounds of bone, sinew and muscle, Kane was seldom physically overawed. This night he stood alone in the desert before one who could overpower him as if he were a weakling child.

He estimated the giant's height somewhere around fifteen feet. It was difficult to tell since he sat crouched on the ground, knees drawn up, enswathed in a cloak of bearskins like a misshapen hairy tent. Disregarding the matter of size, the giant's appearance was human enough—his proportions were those of a man in his prime, though he seemed somewhat lanky from a slightly disproportionate length of limb. Broadly muscled, his weight must be enormous. He wore rough boots the size of panniers, and under the cloak a crudely stitched tunic and leggings of hide. Calves and arms were matted with coarse bristles. Perhaps too bony to be called craggy, his features were not displeasing; his beard was shaggy, brown hair drawn back in a short braid at the

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nape. Brown also were his eyes,set wide beneath an intelligent brow.

Looking him over as a man might size up a stray dog, the giant glanced at Kane's face, and gave an interested grunt. He gazed thoughtfully into Kane's cold blue eyes for a moment—something few cared to do. "You're Kane, aren't you?" he commented.

Kane started, then smiled bitterly. "A thousand miles from the cities of man, and a giant calls me by name."

The giant seemed amused. "Oh, you'll have to wander far if you really seek anonymity. We giants have watched the frantic history of your race. We recall when mankind aborted from its womb, pretending to be adult instead of misbegotten fetus. To man these few centuries are time immemorial; to our race a nostalgic yesterday. We remember well the Curse of Kane and still recognize his mark."

"That history is already garbled and distorted," Kane murmured, eyes for a moment focused beyond. "Kane is becoming misty legend in the old homes of man—and lost in obscurity in the new lands. Already I've travelled through lands where men did not know me for who I am."

"And you kept wandering, too—because they soon learned to dread the name of Kane," concluded the giant. "Well, Kane—my name is Dwassllir, and I'm pleased to find a legend joining me at my lonely fire."

Kane shrugged an ironic acknowledgement. "What's that roasting in your lonely fire?" He looked hungrily at the grease dripping carcass.

"A mountain goat I dropped this afternoon—good game is scarce around here, I've found. Hey, give that spit a nudge, will you?"

Kane heaved the spit to the rarest side. "You going to eat all of it?" he asked bluntly, too hungry for pride.

Dwassllir might well have done so otherwise, but the giant seemed glad for the companionship, and tore off a generous side of ribs that taxed even Kane's voracity. Again the image of stray dog occurred to Kane, but the growling in his belly claimed first place in his thoughts. The goat was tough, stringy, half raw and gamey in taste; it was ecstacy to devour. One eye still watching the giant warily, he gnawed on the ribs with gusto, washing down the greasy flesh with mouthfuls of stale water from Dwassllir's canteen.

With a belch that fanned the flames, Dwassllir stood and stretched—licked his fingers, wiped face with hands, then scrubbed his hands with loose gravel. When the giant was erect, Kane realized that his height was closer to eighteen feet. Leisurely Dwassllir picked over the remains of the goat. "Want anymore?" he inquired. Kane shook his head, still struggling with the ribs. A short tug wrenched loose the remaining hind leg, and the giant settled back with a contented sigh to gnaw the joint.

"Game is hard to run across in this range," he reflected, gesturing with the tattered femur. "Doubt if you'd find anything in that stretch of desert yonder. Likely that horse will be the only meat you'll find until you get into the plains east of here."

"I thought about eating him," Kane conceded. "But on foot I'd stand little chance of crossing this waste."

Dwassllir snorted disparagingly. Because of their enormous size, giants looked upon a horse as only another game animal. "The frailty of your race! Strip man of his crutches, and he's helpless to stand against his

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world."

"Don't oversimplify," Kane objected. "Mankind will be master of this world. In only a few centuries I've seen our civilization grow from a sterile paradise, from scattered barbaric tribes to a vast and expanding empire of cities, villages and farms. Ours is the fastest rising civilization ever to burst upon this world."

"Only because man has stolen his civilization from the ruins of better races who preceded him. Human civilization is parasitic—a gaudy fungus that owes its vitality to the dead genius upon whose corpse it flourishes!"

"Wiser races, I'll grant you," Kane pointed out. "But it is mankind who has survived, not Earth's elder races. It is a measure of man's resourcefulness that he can salvage from prehuman civilizations knowledge that is invaluable to the advance of his own race. Carsultyal has risen thus from a fishing village to the greatest city in the known world. Her rediscovered knowledge has shaped the emergence of mankind to our present civilization."

Dwassllir snapped the femur explosively and sucked at its marrow. "Civilization! You boast that as man's major accomplishment! It is nothing—only an outgrowth of human weakness! Man is too frail, too unworthy a creature to live within his environment. He must instead prop himself up with his civilization, his learning. My race learned to live in the real world—to merge with our environment. We need no civilization. Man is a cripple who flaunts his infirmity, boasts of his crutches. You retreat into the walls of your civilization because you are too weak to stand, before nature as part of the natural environment. Instead of living as partner to nature, man hides behind his civilization, curses and defies true life, distorts his environment to accommodate his own failings. Beware that your environment does not strike back from all your blasphemies, for that day mankind shall be snuffed out like the unnatural freak man is!

"Even you, Kane—you who are reviled as the most dangerous man of your race. Without your horse, your clothes, your weapons—could you have crossed that desert alive as you have just barely done? One of my race could!

"My race is older than yours. We had grown to maturity while a mad god was playing his idiot game of shaping mankind from the bestial filth that skulked where shadow lay deepest. Had man walked the Earth of my race's youth, his civilization would have protected him no better than an eggshell. That Earth was more feral than this world man knows. My ancestors defied storms, glaciers, catastrophes that would have swept away your cities like dry leaves before the wind! They stood naked before beasts more savage than any man has known—grappled and conquered the sabre-tooth, the great sloth, the cave bear, the wooly mammoth, and other creatures whose strength and ferocity are unknown in this tame age! Could man have survived in that heroic age! I doubt that all his cunning and trickery could have saved him!"

"Perhaps not, but then your race has considerable physical advantage," argued Kane, wondering how wise it might be to provoke the other. "If my stride were long as yours, then I wouldn't need a horse to cross a desert—although I think your disdain might not exist, if there were a steed great enough for a giant to straddle.

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Nor would I need my sword if I were huge enough to crush a lion as if it were only a jackel. Your boast is founded on the fact that your size makes you physically superior to the dangers of your environment, which is a boast that any large and powerful animal could echo. Who is braver—one of your ancestors who barehanded throttled a cave bear close to him in size, or a man with a spear who kills a tiger many times his superior in physical power?"

He paused, waiting to see if the giant had taken offense. However, Dwassllir was not of volatile temper. Belly full and feet warm, he was in a pleasant mood for fireside debate with his diminutive companion.

"True, yours is an older race, and mankind an arrogant youth," Kane continued. "But what are the accomplishments of your race? If you scorn to build cities, to sail ships, to settle the wilderness, to master the secrets of prehuman knowledge—then what have you achieved? Art, poetry, philosophy, spiritualism—are those fields your race has mastered?"

"Our achievement has been to live at peace with our environment—to live as a part of the natural world, instead of waging war with nature," declared Dwassllir steadily.

"All right then, I'll accept that, Kane persisted. "Perhaps you have found fulfillment in your rather primitive life style. However, the measure of a race's attainments must finally be its ability to flourish within its chosen role. If your race has done this so well, why then do your numbers diminish, while mankind spreads over the Earth? Never has your race been a populous one, and today man encounters giant only rarely. Will your race then fade away with the passing years—until one day the giants will be known only in legend along with the fierce creatures your ancestors fought? What then will survive your passing? What will remain to tell of your vanished glory?"

Dwassllir became sadly pensive, so that Kane regretted having pursued the argument. "You humans seem too content to measure achievement in terms of numbers," he answered. "But I can't make full refutation of your logic. Our numbers have been declining for centuries, and I can't really tell you why. Our lives are long—I'm not as much your junior in years as you may suppose, Kane. We are slow to mate and raise children, but this was always so. Our natural enemies have all passed into extinction or retreated to the most obscure reaches. Our simple medicines are sufficient to nurse us through whatever disease or injury might strike us. No, our deaths have not increased.

"I think our race has grown old, tired. Perhaps we should have followed the giant beasts of the savage past into the realm of shadow. At least our old enemies gave life adventure! It is as if my race has lived beyond its era, and now we perish from boredom. We're like one of your kings who has conquered all his enemies and now has only a dull old age to endure.

"My race rose in a heroic age, Kane! It was truly a day of giants in that era! But that age is dead. Gone are the great beasts. Vanished the elder races whose wars rocked the roots of mountains. Earth has been inherited by the insignificant scavenger. Man crawls about the ruins of the great age, and proclaims himself to be Earth's new master! Perhaps man will survive to accomplish his insolent usurpation—more likely he will destroy himself in seek-

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ing to command mysteries the elder races found too awesome for even their powers to control!

"But when the day comes that man will be master of the Earth, my race will hopefully not be present to endure that humiliation! We are a race of heroes who have outlived the age of heroes! Can you blame us if we tire of existence in this age of boastful pigmies!"

Kane fell silent. "I understand your sentiments," he finally said. "But to abandon yourself to despair, to brood upon vanished glory doesn't impress me as heroic."

He stopped, not wishing to deepen the shadow of melancholy that had gathered over their thoughts. "May I ask what brings you to this lost wilderness of dead rock?" he asked, thinking to change subject. "Or do those nameless mountains border on the lands of your people?"

Dwassllir shook himself and tossed an uprooted shrub into the fire. The leaves hissed shrilly, then whipped loose from blackened stems to rise like red stars fading into the night. "What I seek is no secret," he replied. "Although it may seem pointless to you as it has to some of my friends.

"Centuries ago, before this region was stripped barren of soil and hence of life, there were villages of my race along these mountains—which are not nameless, but are called the Antamareesi range. Under these hills lie immense caverns, which my ancestors used for shelter in days before they raised houses, then later mined for the veins of metal they discovered within. The climate was warmer, the land was green, game was plentiful—it was a good region to settle and to look upon in that age.

"Those were the great days! Life in that age was an ever challenging struggle between the savagery of the ancient Earth and the unyielding strength of my race! Can you imagine the tremendous energy of those people! They stood chest to chest against ferociously hostile world, and they conquered whatever enemy they faced! Their gods were Fire and Ice—the implacable opposites that were the ruling forces of their age! And their enemies were not only the forces of nature, or the great beasts—some of the elder races challenged the ascendency of my race as well!

"Perhaps it was their sorcery that left this region lifeless and barren. Our legends tell of battles with strange races and stranger weapons in the dawn world—and my ancestors were victorious over these enemies too. The hero of one legenday battle, King Brotemllain, whose name you may know as the greatest king of my race, ruled over these mountains. His body was laid to rest within one of these caverns, and upon his brow remains the ancestral crown of my people—ancient even then, and given to him after death because of the undying greatness of his rule."

Dwassllir was afire now, his momentary depression seared away by intense fervour. He considered Kane thoughtfully, made a decision, and spoke earnestly, "I've been searching for Brotemllain's legendary burial place. And from certain signs, I think I'm about to discover it. I mean to recover his crown! King Brotemllain's crown is emblematic of my race's ancient glory. Although our wars and our kings are all past now, I believe that resurrection of this legendary symbol might unlock some of the old energy and vitality of my people. Perhaps the idea brands me a

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fool and dreamer as many have scoffed, but I mean to do this thing! Surely this relic from an age of heroes could serve to spark some new flame of glory to my race even in these grey days!

"I wouldn't suggest this to another of your race, Kane—but because you are who you are, I'll offer both an invitation and a challenge. If you'd care to come along with me on this search, Kane, I'd welcome your company. It may be that you will understand my race better if you follow me into the shadow of that age of lost glory."

"Thank you for the invitation—and the challenge," declared Kane solemnly. The venture intrigued him, and the giant seemed to eat well. "I'll be proud to make that journey with you."

III *Dead Giant's Crown*

THE TREES grew less far apart here, though still dwarfed and tortured by the chill breeze. Two days had Kane followed Dwassllir about the crumbling ridges—his horse matching the giant's restless stride. Now on the third day Dwassllir's whoop chorused by a hundred echoes announced the termination of his search.

The discovery seemed unimpressive. They had entered a deep valley and traced a course to its gorgelike head, where Kane glanced uneasily at the boulder strewn slopes enclosing them overhead. At times Dwassllir had eagerly pointed out some rounded monument whose carvings the winds of time had all but obliterated. Again he would pause to examine some unprepossessing mound, where the drifting gravel nestled upon blocks of hewn stone and perhaps a shard of ceramic, a smear of charcoal fragments, or a lump of dried wood so ancient that it seemed more lifeless than the stones.

"There stands the entrance to the tomb of King Brotemllain," Dwassllir proclaimed, and he gestured to a rubble choked patch of darkness that burrowed into the valley wall. The opening had been about twenty-five feet high and half as broad, although several feet were now filled in by debris. Evidence of masonry framed the entrance, along with great chunks of shredded wood, some whose blackened splinters were conglomerate with verdigris—all that remained of portals at last fallen to time itself.

"I'm certain this is the valley described in our legends," the giant rumbled jubilantly. "The passage leads into a vast system of caverns. It was a natural opening my ancestors enlarged to enter a major side branch as it passes close to the surface. Beyond these ruins of the ancient monument should lie the domed natural chamber where Brotemllain's corpse was enthroned for the ages."

Kane frowned at the dark opening doubtfully, a whisper of unease drifting through his thoughts. "I wouldn't count on finding much in there but bats and dust. Time and decay generally devour the leavings of less hallowed thieves. Or does this tomb have its unseen guardians? It would seem unusual with so renowned a tenant and so legendary a treasure, if this tomb were not guarded by some still vigilant spell."

With a shrug Dwassllir dismissed Kane's foreboding. "Unusual for your race, maybe. But this was a shrine most sacred to my race. Besides, who would dare pilfer the grave of a giant. Come on, we'll take torches and see if King Brotemllain still holds court."

While Kane struck fire, the giant scoured about for a supply of re-

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siniferous wood. He returned with a dead tree as thick as Kane's thigh. Taking several shorn branches, Kane accompanied Dwassllir into the cave—the latter wielding a section of trunk.

Their progress was quickly interrupted. Blocking the passage but for a narrow crevice interposed a jumble of broken rock. A segment of the passage wall had collapsed.

Dwassllir examined the barrier thoughtfully. "It's going to take some time to dig through this," he concluded sourly.

"Assuming your efforts didn't bring down the rest of the mountain, was Kane's ominous comment. "There's a fault in the rock here, or this slide would not have broken through. If the caverns run as extensively as you say, there must be flaws undermining this entire range. The centuries have spread the cracks and further weakened the rock, so it's solid as a rotted tooth. It's a wonder these mountains haven't tumbled flat before now."

Jabbing out his torch, the giant craned his neck to peer along the crevice. "Passage opens up again, and just beyond I think I can make out where it opens into the main cavern." He glowered at the obstruction helplessly for a moment, then gazed down at the man.

"You know, you could squeeze through that crack, Kane," he told him. "You could get past and see what's beyond. If there's nothing to be found, then there's nothing lost. But if this is King Brotemllain's tomb, then you can learn if his crown still lies within."

Kane considered the crevice, face noncommittal. "It can be done," he pronounced. Casually, not wishing to show his nerve less steady than the giant's: "I'll go look for your bones on my own then."

The crack was inches too narrow for one of Kane's massive build, so that his clothing scuffed and flesh scraped as he wriggled through the tightest portion. But the wall had not collapsed in a solid thrust; rather splintered chunks of stone had broken through in a disordered array, and the occlusion was spread like stubby fingers instead of a compact fist. Then his thrusting torch shone clear of the rubble, and Kane edged into unobstructed passageway. Quickly he rebuckled his scabbard across his back, but the bare blade stayed in his left fist.

A short way beyond he found the cavern. A pair of steps too high for human stride completed the passage's gentle descent. Kane lifted the torch and looked about, his senses strained to catch any hint of danger. There was nothing to detect, but the obscure sense of menace persisted. Waving the brand to fan its light, he was unable to discern the cavern's boundaries, although this chamber seemed to extend for hundreds of feet. Stalactites hung from ceiling far above, making a monstrous multifanged jaw with stalagmite tusks below. "I've just walked down the beast's tongue," mumbled Kane, clambering over the steps. Thin dust sifted over the stone; this cavern was long dead too.

"What do you see, Kane!" roared Dwassllir from the crevice. High above the curtain of bats stirred fitfully.

Despite his familiarity with the giant's deafening tone, Kane started and nervously glanced toward the distant ceiling. The torch flared in his hand as he crossed the chamber, sword poised for whatever laired

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within the darkness.

Then he froze—a thrill tingling through his body as he gazed at what waited at the torchlight's perimeter.

"Dwassllir!" he shouted, in his excitement heedless of the booming echoes. "He's here! You've found the tomb! King Brotemllain's here on his throne, and his crown rests on his skull!"

Revealed in the torchlight jutted an immense throne of hewn stone, upon which its skeletal king still reposed in sepulchral majesty. In the cool aridity of the cavern, the lich had outlasted centuries. Tatters of desiccated flesh held the skeleton together in leathery articulation. Bare bone gleamed dully through chinks in the clinging mail of muscle and sinew, shrunken to iron-like texture. Thronearms were yet gripped by fingers like gnarled oak roots, while about the base was gathered a mouldering drift of disintegrating furs. The gaunt skull retained sufficient shreds of flesh to half mask its death's head grin with lines of sternness—forming a grimace suggesting laughter muffled by set lips. The eyes were sunken circles of darkness whose shadowy depths eluded Kane's torch. Not so the orbs that brooded from above the brow.

Red as setting suns in the torchlight, a pair of fist sized rubies blazed from King Brotemllain's crown. Kane swore softly, impressed by the wealth he witnessed almost as deeply as he stood in awe of its grisly majesty. The circle of gold could belt a dancing girl's waist, and patterned about the two great stones were another ten or more rough cut gems of walnut size. Ancient treasure from the giant's plutonian harvested hoard.

Thinking of the kingdom encircled in the riches of King Brotemllain's crown, Kane bitterly regretted his shout of discovery. Had he reported the cavern empty, there might have been a chance to smuggle the crown past the giant—or return for it later. But now Dwassllir knew of the crown, and Dwassllir waited at the only exit to the tomb. To attempt to find egress through some hypothetical interpassage into the network of caverns said to run under the mountains would be suicidal—slightly less so than to challenge the giant for possession. Kane ruefully studied the treasure. Unless chance presented for stealthy murder . . .

"Kane!" The giant's bellow concluded his musing. "You all right in there, Kane? Is it really King Brotemllain?"

"Can't be anything else, Dwassllir!" Kane yelled back, echoes garbling his words. "It's just like your legends told! There's a colossal throne of stone in the cavern's center! About twenty feet of mouldy skeleton's sitting on it, and on his skull there's a golden crown with two enormous rubies! Just a minute and I'll climb up and get it for you!"

"No! Leave it there!" Eagerness shook the giant's shout. "I want to see this for myself!" From the barrier sounded groan and rattle of shifting rubble.

"Wait, damn it all!" Kane howled, scrambling back to the passage. "You're going to bring the whole damn mountain down on us! I'll get your crown for you!"

"Leave it! This isn't just a treasure hunt! It's more than just recovering Brotemllain's crown!" puffed the giant, straining to roll back a boulder. "I've dreamed for more years than you can guess of standing before King Brotemllain's throne! Of standing where no giant has entered since the heroic age of my race! Of calling upon

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his shade for the strength to lead my race back to its lost glory! So I'll stand before King Brotemllain, and I'll lift his crown from his brow with my own hands! And when I return, my people will see and listen and know that the tales of our ancient greatness are history, not myth!

"Now come on and help me widen this crevice, will you? You can clear away this smaller stuff. This cavern's stood for millennia; we can risk another few minutes."

Kane cursed and joined him at the barrier—reflecting that it was useless arguing with a fanatical giant. Grimly he hauled back on a boulder jammed against the inner face of the blockage.

A sudden tearing groan and Dwassllir's gasp of dismay gave him barely enough warning. Kane catapulted backward just as the unbalanced rock slide protested their trespass. Like the irresistible fist of doom, the rock shelf burst from the wall and smashed against the opposite side!

Deafened by the concussion, pelted by splintered fragments, Kane twisted frantically to roll clear. He fell in a bruised huddle past the foot of the steps. For a moment of dazed confusion it seemed that the entire cavern rocked and bucked with a crescendo repercussion of the collapsed passageway.

When the last slamming echo had lost its note, the final chunk of cracked stone bounced past. Kane groggily sat up to lick his wounds. Sore, but no bones broken, a long gash down his left shoulder. His sword arm was numb where a rock splinter had struck, and it would need bandaging to staunch the trickle of blood. Relatively unscathed, he decided, considering he had nearly been crushed deader than King Brotemllain.

His sword was still sheathed, but the torch had been lost as he leapt away, and the chamber was as dark as a tomb could get. Kane did not need a torch to learn the worst; the absence of any ray of light told him that. King Brotemllain's tomb was also sealed as thoroughly as any tomb need be.

IV. *A Final Coronation*

GLOOMILY he felt his way back along the passage and pushed against the intervening wall of rock. There were boulders as wide as he was tall, and the spaces between were packed solid with lesser rubble. Given slaves and equipment enough, he might clear out another crevice. Dwassllir could perhaps burrow through, but the giant was probably a mangled keystone in the barrier right now.

Burnt pitch stung his groping fingers, and Kane tugged the extinguished torch out from under some debris. Since there seemed little else to do, he sat down and struck a fire. The torch alight once more, the rockslide appeared no less substantial. Angrily Kane kicked at a toppled boulder.

Air fanned the torch flame, however, pointing a yellow beckoning finger back into the burial cavern. Remembering this cave was a branch of a greater plexus, Kane eagerly sought to trace the faint stir of wind.

As he crossed the chamber, Kane saw the effects of the rockslide within the cavern. The sudden grinding force had sent a shudder through the tired stone, so that stalactites had plummeted like crystal lightning bolts from their eternally dark heaven. One had missed spearing Brotemllain by scant yards.

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A sighing wind breathed corpse breath through a gaping pit many yards across at the cavern's one end. The explosive concussions that rocked the stone had not been fantasy of a head blow then. Evidently in the chain reaction shockwave which the slide had drummed the brittle stone, a large section of rock from the high ceiling had struck here. Its impact had driven through the chamber floor to reveal another cavern beneath this one. The network of caves must bore through the mountains like the tortuous course of a feasting worm, thought Kane, peering into the pit.

Wind gusted faintly through the hole, bringing a sick smell of dampness—a stale, unclean animal smell that intrigued Kane. It seemed he could hear the rush of unseen waters. An underground river probably—deep underground it must be too. The wind stole in through rotted chinks in the mountains' shell most likely. At least Kane hoped his deductions were correct.

The floor of this new cavern appeared to be about seventy-five feet below him. The collapsing stone had made a chaotic incline down which progress seemed possible. "I've found another road to Hell," Kane muttered aloud.

A rustle beyond him made him look to its source; then he knew he was on the threshold of Hell. At the edge of light danced a cockroach—incredibly, a bone white cockroach nearly a yard in length. With chitinous concentration, it was nuzzling a dead bat, and it waved its antennae querulously at the offending light. In disbelief Kane tossed a rock in its direction, and the roach scuttled off chuckling into the darkness.

Fascinated, Kane returned to the pit and thrust his torch out over the aperture. Near the incline's base two white furred creatures raised blind eyes to the light and slunk away squealing in fear. And Kane recognized them be to rats the size of jackels.

Understanding came to him. Water, air—the caverns below held life. But an obscenely distorted form of life it was. Probably these out-sized creatures had evolved from cave dwellers who somehow were trapped beneath the surface ages ago—or maybe retreated there from choice when the land became desert. In primeval night, without seasons, without light, they had mutated to grotesque, primitive forms—adapted to the demented savagery of their environment. Falling stone had crushed bats as well as other nameless things, and now the scent of blood was luring the monstrous cave creatures to this area.

And what else dwells below? wondered Kane uneasily. He drew away from the pit, deciding that so certain a path to Hell could rest untrod until all other chances of escape were eliminated. Digging out through the passage even seemed a brighter prospect.

As he returned to the rock fall, he caught the sound of stone grating on stone. For a moment he feared the slide was shifting, but as he watched tensely he saw this was not so. Excitement cutting through despondency, Kane quickly stepped to the barrier and rhythmically pounded against a boulder with a chunk of rock.

After a pause, his tapping was dimly echoed from the opposite side. So the giant had escaped the avalanche! His strength could clear the passage if it were at all possible.

Eagerly Kane began to dig into his

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side of the barrier. Not daring to contemplate another slide, he strained his powerful back to roll away small boulders, tore his fingers scrabbling doglike through the chipped stone. Luckily, it was a bed of broken rock that had slid into the passage, rather than a solid stone shelf.

Time crawled immeasurably, marked only by the dwindling torch and the deepening excavation. Kane's hands were raw and blistered when a sudden wrenching of stone tore open a patch of daylight. Filtered by distance and dust, the ray of sunlight seemed of blinding brilliance to his eyes.

"Dwassllir!" shouted Kane, peering through the chink in the barrier. A shaft perhaps the size of a man's head had been formed between the angle of two boulders, although several feet of debris yet blocked the passage.

A huge brown eye squinted back at him. "Kane?" The giant sounded pleasantly surprised. "So you dodged the slide, manling! You're as hard to kill as legend tells!"

"Can you get me out of here?"

"Can if I'm going to get myself in!" Dwassllir returned stubbornly. "I think I can prop up these boulders so we can dig out space enough for me to crawl through."

"One of the characteristics of higher life forms is the ability to learn by experience," grumbled Kane, bending his back to dislodge a portion of rubble. But the giant's determination was as unyielding as the rock about them.

Slowly the crevice began to reappear, and with freedom outlined in an ever broadening patch of light, the grueling work seemed less fatiguing. Only a precariously balanced jumble of boulders remained.

But this time warning came too late.

A sudden shriek of rasping stone as Dwassllir recklessly hauled back on one of the piled boulders! Released from pressure, a second slab of rock plunged forward like a catapult missile. Kane yelled and tried to dodge. He had been unbalanced with effort, and even his blurring speed was too slow to evade the tumbling projectile.

Thunder as it struck, the slab caroomed crazily upon the piled boulders, spun about and smashed against the wall where Kane stood. Kane hissed in pain. At the last instant he had twisted behind a sheltering boulder. This had absorbed the impact of the falling slab, but the explosive force had jammed the intervening rock against his thighs, pinning him to the wall.

Blood oozed from torn skin, trickled into his boots. Grimacing in pain as he tried to wriggle free, Kane discovered he had escaped crushed bones by the smallest fraction.

Miraculously, the rest of the pile had held stable. Dwassllir was cautiously poking at the opening. "Kane? Damn! You're harder to kill than a snake! Can you squeeze out of there?"

"I can't!" grunted Kane, straining to slide the rock. "Lot of rock fragments all jammed together—holding it in place! My feet are pinned in!" He cursed and writhed against his pillory, scraping off more skin as the only evident result.

"Well, I'll pull you out as I dig through," boomed Dwassllir reassuringly, and he once more attacked the rockslide.

But Kane heard sounds of grating rock not turned by Dwassllir's hand. From within the burial cavern he could hear a heavy body climbing over loose stone.

Teeth bared in defiant snarl, Kane stared wild eyed into the funeral

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chamber.

At first he thought the corpse of King Brotemllain had risen on skeletal limbs—for wavering in the darkness he could discern two ruby coals throwing back the torchlight. But the crown had not moved, still made sullen glow above the throne.

These were truly eyes he saw—eyes that held him in a baleful glare. Climbing from the aperture in the cavern floor came a creature from beneath the abyss of night!

Sabre-tooth! Or nightmare spawn of sabre-tooth tiger and stygian darkness! The gargantuan creature that shambled forth from the timeless caverns of night was as demented progeny of its natural forebears as were the other grotesque cave beasts Kane had seen. Rock crunched beneath taloned tread as it stalked from the gaping pit, an albino behemoth more than double the stature of its fearsome ancestor. Dripping jaws yawned hungrily in a cough of challenge—sabre-toothed jaws that could close upon Kane as a cat snaps up a rat.

Lord Tloluvin alone might know what fantastic demons stalked the unlighted caverns that crawled down into his hellish realm, what depraved savagery in their nighted netherworld bred the cave beasts to grotesque giantism. Drawn by the noise and the scent of blood, this moster had left its sunless lair to hunt on the threshold of a land barred to its demonic kin for uncounted centuries.

It sensed its prey.

Unable to squirm free, Kane drew his sword for a hopeless defense. The cave creature had located him—in the darkness its hunting senses must be preternaturally keen—but it hesitated to spring. Seemingly it was confused by the wan rays of sunlight trespassing upon its realm.

The torch lay thrust between rock almost within Kane's reach. By a series of desperate lunges he succeeded in spearing it on his swordtip and drawing it to him. Answering the sabre-tooth's growl, he swung the brand to flaring brilliance. The cat retreated somewhat, still intent on its trapped prey, but uncertain how to cope with this blazing light that seared its all but sightless eyes.

"Dwassllir! Can you break through!" The torch had burned through much of its length, so that the dwindling flame stung Kane's fingers.

The giant groaned with frantic effort. "There's a slab of rock midway I can't shift without bringing down the whole slide! If I had a beam I could use for bracing, I could grub out the boulders holding it up and crawl through! Not enough room through there otherwise!"

The sabre-tooth coughed angrily and advanced a step, stubby tail twitching. Its hunger would soon overwhelm its caution, Kane realized in sick dread, as the cat drew its mammoth bulk into a crouch. In a minute its spring would crush him against the stone.

Eyes blazing feral hatred, Kane steadied his sword. There would be time for only one hopeless thrust as the cat's irresistible spring splintered his chest to pulpy ruin, but Kane meant for his slayer to feel his steel.

"I'll try for his throat when he leaps!" Kane shouted grimly. "Wound him bad as I'm able! Go back and hunt up a log to brace with, Dwasslir. If my sword thrusts deep enough to cripple, there's a chance you can kill this beast with your axe. Brotemllain's crown waits there for you, and when you return to your people you can tell them the price of its winning!"

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Dwasslir was tearing away rubble furiously, though Kane did not risk a glance to note his progress. "Keep the cat back as long as you can, Kane!" His voice came muffled. "It was my doing got you into this, and I'll not abandon you like a slinking coward!"

The torch was sputtering, moments of life remained for both flame and wielder. Came a low rumble of shifting stone, but Kane glared unwaveringly into the cat's wrathful eyes. The tiger started, spat in sudden bafflement. Kane braced himself to meet its deadly lunge, then saw in amazement that the sabre-tooth was edging away.

A flaming length of trunkwood slithered across the stones, propelled by a bass roar from down low. Turning in disbelief, Kane saw Dwasslir's grimy face grinning triumphantly up at him from beneath a jutting shelf of rock.

"Made it, by damn!" the giant bellowed. He grunted breathlessly as he wriggled his colossal frame through the burrow he had dug. "Used my axe to shore up that main slab! She creaked some, but her haft's seasoned hickory, and she'll likely hold till we're out of here!"

At the sudden appearance of a creature rivalling its own awesome bulk, the sabre-tooth had retreated into the darkness of the cavern. Dwassllir shoved his torch farther down the passage, then bent to Kane. A heave of his mighty shoulders drew back the imprisoning stone.

Kane pitched forward. Biting his lips against the agony, he slithered out of the crevice to freedom.

"Can you walk, manling?"

Wincing, Kane took a few unsteady strides. "Yeh, though I'd rather ride."

The giant hefted the torch. "I'll see King Brotemllain now." he declared.

"Don't be a fool, Dwassllir!" Kane protested. "Without your axe you're no match for that monster! You haven't driven it off—it's still prowling in the cavern! We'll be lucky to crawl out before it decides to attack!" The giant brushed him aside.

"Look, at least let's draw back and give that cat a chance to leave! We can find timber to shore up the ledge, and free your axe! Then we'll try for the crown!"

"Not enough time!" Dwassllir's face was resolute. "I never really expected that axe to hold. It'll give way any second, and this shaft will be sealed forever! Can't even risk trying to wrench it free! The torch will keep the beast at bay. long enough to get the crown. Besides, he won't be the only demon to crawl up from the pit. You don't need to stay though."

Kane swore and limped after him.

"Ha! Sabre-tooth!" roared Dwassllir, scooping up a broken section of stalactite. A growl answered him from the cavern's echoing recesses. "Sabre-tooth! Do you know me! My ancestors were your enemy! We fought your forebears in ages past and made necklaces for our women from your pretty fangs! Hear me, sabre-tooth! Though you're three times the size of your tawny ancestor, I've no fear of you! I am Dwassllir—last true son of the blood of the old kings! I've come for my crown! Hide in your hole, sabre-tooth—or I'll have a white fur cloak to wear with my royal crown!"

The giant's challenge echoed through the cavern, rolled back by the sabre-tooth's angry snarl. Somewhere in the shadows the cat paced stiff legged—but the cacaphony of echoes made its position uncertain. Bats swooped in panic; dust and bits of stone trickled over them. Kane

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shifted his sword uneasily, not caring to think what silent blow might strike his back.

"King Brotemllain! The legends of my race do not lie!" breathed Dwasslir in awe. Reverently he stood before the throne of the ages dead hero—his face aglow with vision of ancient glory. Reflected in his eyes was crimson brightness from the ruby crown.

The giant discarded stalactite club, stretched to touch the dead king's crown. With gentle strength he broke it free from its encrusted setting. "Grandsire, your children have need of this . . ."

Avalanche of ivory fanged terror, the sabre-tooth bolted from the darkness! Shattering silence with its killing scream, it leapt for the giant's unprotected back. Off guard, Dwassllir pivoted at the final instant to half evade the cat's full rush. Its crushing impact hurled giant and cave beast against the throne and onto the cavern floor.

Jaws locked in Dwassllir's shoulder, the tiger raked furiously against his back, talons tearing deep gashes. Kane limped in, sword flashing. But his movements were clumsy, and at first slash a blow of the creature's paw spun him away. He fell heavily at the foot of the throne, shook his head dully to clear vision.

Dwassllir howled and lurched to his knees, huge hands clawing desperately to dislodge the murderous fangs. His flailing arm touched the fallen torch, and he seized it instantly, smashed its blazing end into the monster's face. Seared by the blinding heat, the sabre-tooth released its death grip with an enraged shriek—and the giant's punishing kick flung them apart.

Smoke hung over the cat's gory maw. Gouts of scarlet spurted from the giant's deeply gouged shoulder. "Face to face, sabre-tooth!" roared Dwasslir wildly. "Skulker in shadow! Slinking coward! Dare now to attack your master face to face!"

Even as the tiger crouched to spring, Dwassllir leapt upon it, crippled left arm brandishing the torch. They grappled in midair, and the cavern seemed to quake at their collision. Over and over they rolled, torch flung wide, while Kane groggily tried to regain his feet. The giant struggled grimly to stave off those awful fangs, to writhe atop the sabre-tooth's greater bulk. Fearsome jaws champed on emptiness as they fought, but its slashing claws were goring horrible wounds through the giant's flesh.

Stoically enduring the agony, Dwassllir threw all his leviathan strength into tightening his grip on the cat's head. He bellowed insanely—curses of pain, of fury—locked his teeth in the beast's ear and ripped away its stump with taunting laughter. Life blood poured over his limbs, made a slippery mat of scarlet sodden white fur. Still he howled and jeered, chanted snatches of ancient verse—sagas of his race—pounded the sabre-tooth's skull against stone.

With a sudden wrench, Dwassllir hauled himself astride the cat's back. "Now die, sabre-tooth!" he roared. "Die knowing defeat as did your scrawny grandsires!"

He dug his knees into the creature's ribs, clamped heels together beneath its belly. The cat tried to roll, to dislodge him—but it could not! Great fists knotted over frothed fangs, arms locked champing jaws apart—Dwassllir bunched his shoulders and heaved backward. Gasping, coughing breath snorted from the cat's nostrils; its struggle was no longer to attack. For the first time in

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centuries, a sabre-tooth knew fear.

Blood gleamed a rippling pattern across the straining muscles of the giant's broad back. Irresistibly his hold tightened. Inexorably the tiger's spine bowed backward. An abrupt, explosive snap as vertebrae and sinew surrendered!

Laughing, Dwasslir twisted the sabre-tooth's head completely around. He spat into its dying eyes.

"Now then, King Brotemllain's crown!" he gasped, and staggered away from the twitching body. The giant reeled, but stood erect. His fur garments were shredded, dark and sticky. Blood flowed so freely as to shroud the depth and extent of his wounds; flaps of flesh hung ragged, and bone glistened yellow as he moved.

He groaned as he reached the throne and slumped down with his back braced against it. Kane found his senses clear enough to stand and knelt beside the stricken giant. Deftly his hands explored the other's wounds, sought vainly to staunch the bright spurting blood from the sabre gouges. But Kane was veteran of too many battles not to know his wounds were mortal.

Dwasslir grinned gamely, his face pale beneath splashed gore. "That, Kane, is how my ancestors overcame the great beasts of Earth's dawn."

"No giant ever fought a creature like this," Kane swore, "nor killed it barehanded!"

The giant shruggled weakly. "You think not, manling? But you don't know the legends of our race, Kane. And the legends are truth, I know that now! Fire and Ice! Those were heroic days!"

Kane looked about the cavern, then bent to retrieve a fallen circle of gold. The rubies gleamed like Dwasslir's life blood; the crown was heavy in his hands. And though there was a fortune in his grasp, Kane no longer wanted King Brotemllain's crown.

"This is yours now," he muttered, and placed the crown upon Dwasslir's nodding brow.

The giant's head came erect again, and there was fierce pride in his face—and sadness. "I might have led them back to those lost days of glory!" he whispered. Then: "But there'll be another of my race, perhaps—another who will share my vision of the great age!"

He signed for Kane to leave him. Already his eyes looked upon things beyond this lonely cavern in a desolate waste. "That was an age to live in!" he breathed hoarsely. "An age of heroes!"

Kane somberly rose to his feet. "A great race, a heroic age—it's true," he acknowledged softly. "But I think the last of its heroes has passed."

—KARL EDWARD WAGNER

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Michael Milhaus made his professional debut here last issue with "A Personal Demon," in which we met Professor Willis Baxter and his personal demon, the charming Anathae. Willis and Anathea are back—with a brand new problem to be dealt with. It concerns a stag party, magic gone awry, and a terrible confrontation with the Nether Powers—

IN A PIG'S EYE

MICHAEL F. X. MILHAUS

Illustrated by Steve Fabian

"YOU WILL *not* jump nude at that stag party!"

Willis Baxter slumped into his ancient purple easychair, worn smooth from long years of use, and pulled his hand across his dark five-o'clock stubble. He looked all around the livingroom—everywhere but at Anathae.

"You're being ridiculous, Wil," the girl-demon replied. "If we don't show up at Rockhurst's party, he won't give that money to the University—and if he doesn't, you'll be relieved of your new position."

The rumpled University professor, who could find no fault in the logic of her statement, nonetheless tried to protest: "Yes, but—"

Anathae held up a hand and Willis shut up.

"You summoned me back up from Hell for that very reason," she said. "Besides, I'll love it! Can't you just see it?"

She pirhouetted gracefully between Willis and the couch, coming to a stop directly in front of him with her hands on her hips. The yellow minidress she wore suddenly vanished and the pubescent lines of her body gleamed in the lamplight.

She appeared, dear Reader, to be not more than fourteen years old—at most fifteen. Her breasts were hard, small but fully rounded and firm, with delicate pink nipples; her stomach was taut and smooth with a deep, well-rounded navel, and her hips, although slim, seemed fuller because of an eighteen-inch waist. Her hair, a tawny mane which fell long and unruly down her back, was somewhat darker than her pubic hair which matched the hair sprinkled down her legs to her dainty cloven hooves. When she shook her head at Willis, small red horns peeped out from among her curls. Her long red tail, descending from the end of her spine, was stiff with excitement.

"Wil," she continued, her voice as smooth as butterscotch, "technically I need your permission to go, since you called me here. If you're so stuffy . . ."

Her voice trailed off as Willis looked up at her. His brown eyes, normally soft and anxious, glittered anger. "I suppose you'd rather go

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back to Hell?" he bellowed. But then his eyes turned soft again, and he lost the advantage he might have had.

"You know I wouldn't, Wil," she said softly. Anathae knelt down before him on the hooked rug and rested her chin on his knees. Her dress formed around her again. "And I hope you'll never get mad enough to send me back again. You, as well as I, know the dangers—"

It was Willis's turn to hold up his hand, Anathae's to demur. He did not need reminding that to send her back could mean he might not be able to call her back up again.[1]

Willis Baxter looked down into the green fires of Anathae's eyes and sighed. Since he'd first called her forth from Hell—in what he had half believed was parlor entertainment—his entire life had changed. All in the space of one faculty party, he had acquired a permanent live-in roommate who seldom took no for an answer (or at least did not acquiesce in the regu-

1. Although such a reminder might not be amiss here—especially if you are so unfortunate as not to have read "A Personal Demon," poor Reader. A demon who fails to appear when summoned by name must be consigned to Hell forever by whoever has attempted the summoning—for obvious reasons. But, according to Raymond de la Farte (a world-reknowned authority on demonology), even a demon cannot be at two places at the same time. "It is reasonable to assume," de la Farte said, "that most, if not all, demons have been called by two magicians at the same time at some point down through the ages." Q.E.D. In fact, as both we and Prof. Willis Baxter have learned, the number of demons who may be summoned in this day and age can be counted on the fingers of one thumb: Anathae. Prior to publication of "A Personal Demon" (available in better magazine stores everywhere), her name had only been mentioned once in human writings on the subject.—*Your Helpful Author.*

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lar way), had been elevated to head the Arts and Sciences Division at Powhattan University, had turned a mere rival into a true enemy and had lost an albatross of a girlfriend.

"Anny, Anny," he said, "can't you see—don't you understand—that you're just a young girl they want to exploit and use in the most vulgar way? After the party, there's no telling—"

He stopped at the gleam in Anathae's eyes.

They were not, those eyes, the eyes of an innocent young girl—they were ageless, with memories of the pyramids, Pelleponesian battles, Merovingan castles and the Hundred Years War. Looking into them, he briefly felt as if he'd dropped through an icy green vortex into the past—and then, just as suddenly, he was back in his four-room apartment, just off campus from old P.U.

"Well, okay, scratch that," he said. "I know you can take care of yourself. You've been around quite a bit longer than I have. Still—"

"Come on, Wil. Why don't we live a little? It's what we're here for."

Her fingers began to trespass inside his pantsleg. Willis stood up and began to pace a circle between the couch and the chair—because, as much as he would have liked to live a little right then, he wanted to keep his head about him while he talked.

"Even if there was nothing wrong with it, which there is," he said, "it would be risky. If someone like Hawthorne found out about it—"

"If he knew my middle name, I wouldn't be afraid of *him*," she said, her voice haughty. Anathae floated lightly to her feet and pulled her hair up to the apex of her head. Her eyes narrowed as she walked with exaggerated grace to the bedroom and opened the door. "Maybe he needs a lesson."

"No!" Willis said, lunging after her, then stopping. He pulled himself up straight, to his full six feet, thrust out his chin and walked with determination into the bedroom. "Don't use magic on him. The less he suspects, the better."

Anathae's voice echoed from inside the bathroom. "I thought you said he figured out about me?"

Willis sat down on the bed's precisely-laid green coverlet. He glanced at the familiar clutter on the mahogany chest-of-drawers, and then at the lace underwear with split crotches which festooned the night table and the closet door. A transparent nightgown lay in the middle of the floor like a throw rug.

"I can't be sure," the professor said with a croak. He cleared his throat, forcing the images of underwear and nightgowns out of his consciousness, and began again. "I can't be sure, but he certainly seems to be on the right track. He's been getting old manuscripts from the library service—the xeroxing must be costing him a fortune! But every day he's there in the faculty lounge, pouring over all those pages, looking for something to get back at me with—I can tell. I don't want you to do anything that might let him know he's on the right track. He's taken out a stack of books on demonology I know he's read before—all the ones by de la Farte."

"Your pseudonym," Anathae said, her laughter echoing against the smooth tiles of the bathroom. Suddenly the shower turned on and splashing water all but drowned out her voice. "If he only knew!"

"I don't want him to know. At lunch today, he was doodling pentagrams and weird designs all over his

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notebook. I sat three seats away, and I could see him. He's out to get us for what we did to him, and he won't stop at anything—even calling forth a demon himself."

The shower beat as loud as dropping marbles so that Anathae had to shout above the noise to be heard. "There's nobody left down there he can call, Wil. I was the last one capable of leaving—believe me, I should know. The only one who could get out now is The Boss himself—and Hawthorne would have to be both a fool and an idiot to call *him*. Even I crouched in a corner when he was around—gave me the willies."

"There's no telling what Hawthorne might be foolish enough to do," Willis said. He folded his hands behind his head and messaged the aching muscles of his neck; it had been a long day—a Friday before Spring exams—and he had found the responsibilities and paperwork of his new position complex and seemingly endless.

The water turned off in the bathroom and suddenly Anathae stepped into the bedroom—covered only by a thin cloud of steam. Her hair fell in slick locks across her shoulders, between her pert breasts.

"Getting back to the subject," she said, smiling, "the party's at ten tonight. Are we going, or not?"

Willis pursed his lips. "I have a lot of paperwork to catch up on," he said. "If I get caught up, we'll go. *If!*"

"If we don't, you won't have any paperwork to catch up on—the Dean will take your chairmanship away from you."

"He's already made the announcement of my appointment—"

"—and he can follow it with an announcement of the appointment of your successor, Professor Hawthorne. Is that what you want?"

Willis sighed. "No. But the more I think about it, the less I like the idea that it should all hinge on your doing this."

"Dear Wil. I appreciate your willingness to sacrifice everything you've hoped and worked for, just to 'protect' my 'innocence.' I appreciate it—but I'm not going to let you do it." Anathae sat down on his lap and stroked his cheek. "You're such a prude," she continued, "that I sometimes wonder if there's any hope for you." She batted her long lashes, nuzzled his neck with her busy lips and started to nibble at an ear. "Well, *is* there any hope?"

"Stop it, Anny! I'm not in the mood for any foolishness! And you're getting me wet. If you're so sure you want to go, we'll go—"

"Thank you!"

"But if we're going to go, we'll have to leave soon—it's already late. We don't have time—"

"Don't worry about the time," she said.

THE STAG PARTY Norman Rockhurst was to host for Governor Isador Asque was not, of course, to be held anywhere near the Governor's Mansion. You can, dear Reader, easily imagine the risks that would entail—especially since Mrs. Asque looked down on such doings and was as likely as not to burst in on the activities and make the sort of fuss that keeps the sensational national tabloids thriving.

No, the party was to be held in Rockhurst's fabled estate on Seneca Street in faroff Wood's Hole. The industrialist had sent his Missus to Boston for a weekend of shopping—an expense he could afford with far greater ease than could the Governor.

The Rockhurst Manse was one of those old, rambling Colonial

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structures—three stories of imposing marble and stone, with graceful pillars around a large front porch. The only defect it had (if one might actually have the audacity to *call* it a defect) was that the grounds were right on a main traffic route through the city. The Government research work had stepped up the local economy from the old days, and there was a constant flow of cars, trucks and taxis sweeping right by—only a scant few hundred yards from the imposing front door.

However, a high and neatly manicured hedge bordered the grounds, shielding the premises from the sight—if not quite the roar—of passing traffic.

Rockhurst had spared no expense in setting up the party. Although there would be no more than twenty-five guests in all—including 'ladies of the evening'—he had arranged for a buffet large enough for forty. There was special entertainment planned for after the buffet—and, after that, movies, more drinking and, eventually, the ladies.

The caterers had delivered the chopped liver, thin-sliced salami, corned beef, pastrami, ham, and cheese trays in good order.

The soft and beautiful young ladies had been delivered discretely in Cadillacs that were not too much different than those which had brought the guests.

The cook had set up four large salad trays and three self-serve bars at stratetic locations, as well as hors d'oeuvres.

Indeed, everything was in good order—except for one thing. The main attraction of the evening, the 'special entertainment', a young lady whose nude performance Rockhurst had promised all the guests would be nothing less than sensational, was late.

"Norman!" The Governor's tenor voice sounded across the crowded drawing room and over the sounds of the British rock group on the stereo. "When's this show going to get on the road?"

Rockhurst peered out into the dark-suited crowd of men in the parlor who were obscured partially by a dimly-lit haze of cigar smoke. At last he located Asque's diminutive form.

"Izzy—" Rockhurst held out his hands as Asque squeezed through the crowd and came toward him. "We're waiting for that magic-strip show I promised everyone."

Asque straightened the lapels of his pearl-grey suit and smoothed back his thinning black hair. He was a short man of about fifty, but what he lacked in height he made up for in vivacity. He was currently married to the second Mrs. Asque, had five children—the sixth on the way. The pitter-patter of little vote-getters and income tax deductions kept him working long hard hours down at the State House and playing long hard hours after dark.

"It's a pity," Rockhurst continued, smiling. "I mean, that it has to be a *combination* magic and nude act. There used to be quite a difference between the two."

The Governor bit at the industrialist's bait. "What do you mean?"

"Well, a magic show is a cunning array of stunts."

The Governor frowned, then smirked, then laughed. " 'A cunning array of stunts.' I like that." He looked at his watch again. "Can't you call this girl's manager, or something? Didn't you say you knew him?"

"No, not really," Rockhurst said. "Met the fellow at a faculty party down at Powhattan. I made the Dean

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an offer he couldn't refuse—in exchange for which he promised to have them both here. I really wonder what's keeping them."

The Governor mouthed his cigar absently. "Probably the same pimp who sets up college broads with the researchers down in the Complex," he mumbled to himself.

At that moment, the door chimes sounded an elaborate scale and Rockhurst stepped to the door and pulled it open; a cold breeze flowed into the room. And there, shivering on the doorstep, were Professor Willis Baxter and Anathae, looking for all the world as if they had just popped there out of thin air.

They had, in fact, just popped there out of thin air.

Rockhurst stepped forward and held out his hand. "Hello, Baxter. You're late."

Willis shook hands. "Hello again," he said somewhat grudgingly. "Sorry. We came as quickly as we could."

Anathae just smiled.

Rockhurst turned to her and said, "You're as lovely as ever I remember you, my dear."

Anathae fairly glowed with delight. "Oh, do you like the dress?" She turned around slowly and Willis blushed. She wore a 'full-length' gown of crimson sequins, with the back cut down to a point just barely high enough to hide her tail and the front plunging almost to her tawny-gold pubic hair. The whole thing was kept together by skillful engineering—and no small amount of magic.

To this display, Rockhurst, who was never at a loss for words, was at a loss for words. But Governor Asque stepped forward to offer her his hand: "Come in, my dear. You must be positively freezing in that little dress."

Anathae took the Governor's proffered hand, stepped into the foyer and said, "You look like you'd be willing to help me get warmed up." A smile insinuated its way across her face as she turned, beckoning to Willis. "Come on, Wil. Stay near me."

The professor stepped into the foyer and the door shut softly behind him. "Just let me take off my coat," he mumbled, sizing up Asque with suspicion.

Asque slipped his arm around Anathae's waist so that his hand came to rest on the flesh bared by her dress. Studying the detail of her midriff, and keeping his voice carefully low so that Willis would not overhear, he said, "You don't need the pimp."

Anathae looked coldly and deeply into Asque's grey eyes. Disdaining a reply to him, she said, "Come on, Wil. Let's get the party going."

Willis nodded stiffly, angry because of the whispering, angry that a fifty-year-old man should have his hands on Anathae (even if she was thousands of years old), angry again at being here.

He handed a butler his camelhair coat as Rockhurst stepped to the other side of the girl-demon.

Willis cleared his throat several times before either of the other men would give him their attention. When at last one of Rockhurst's eyes turned toward him and the Governor's head was at a 45° angle to Anathae and Willis, Willis said, "I'll have to take Anny to a room adjoining the one where we're to perform."

While it actually did not matter where she went, Willis already had decided that placing her in a nearby room would give their act of magic the appearance of a magic act.

"I'll be happy to escort her," Rockhurst said.

"Nonsense," the Governor said.

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"I'll do it."

For the briefest of moments one could see, in Rockhurst's eyes, the forces of avarice beating down the forces of lust: He did not, after all, really *need* the millions of dollars worth of contracts which the Commonwealth gave him each year—although they were nice to have.

"Of course," Rockhurst said. Then, turning to Willis, he said, "Join me in a drink?"

Willis looked at Anathae. "You'll be all right?"

"I can handle it," she said.

Willis and Rockhurst walked into the parlor.

To lead Anathae to the side room, the Governor and the girl-demon had to pass by the parlor door. As they did so, the Governor turned his head in the direction of the parlor and his eyes fell on one of the young ladies there.

He stopped short—as if some previously half-registered fact had at last made an indelible impression on his mind.

"Excuse me," the Governor said to Anathae as he stepped back to the doorway. "Norman," he said, "would you come here a moment?"

Rockhurst pointed Willis in the direction of one of the bars and came back out to the Governor. "What is it?" he asked.

"That girl," Asque said, not pointing but indicating with a movement of his eyes that he meant one of the young ladies, "is she . . . colored?"

Rockhurst turned casually to look at the girl in question, then turned back to the Governor. "No," he said, "I don't think so. Spanish-American would be my guess."

"I don't think it wise, in any event. Please have her removed," the Governor said, with obvious distaste.

"If you wish."

Rockhurst returned to the parlor.

"Sorry," Asque said as he put his hand back on Anathae's lithe hips. "I have nothing against coloreds, you understand. But most of them live like pigs. This one, I think, should be taught a lesson."

"Pigs?" Anathae said. "Oh, I quite agree. Some people *should* be taught a lesson."

She muttered a few inaudible words.

WILLIS BAXTER had not heard what the Governor had said about the lady in the parlor—he had been too busy with his own dark thoughts. He saw Rockhurst step back into the parlor and summon a butler, into whose ear he whispered something. Although Willis could no longer see the Governor or Anathae, he thought he heard the Governor's tenor voice saying something to her about magic acts and cunning stunts.

The butler crossed the room to a dark-skinned raven-haired beauty and said something to the young woman which apparently surprised her. She took an envelope from him and, after setting her drink aside, got to her feet, walked to the front door and let herself out.

Willis turned to survey the rest of the room and collided with the self-serve bar. He managed to catch the two bottles which were in the process of falling to the floor; he started to place them back, had second thoughts, picked up a glass and, without checking the labels, poured half and half of each into it, then upended the glass.

Scotch and bourbon.

Willis stuck out his tongue and tried to wipe it with a napkin. "Ach," he said to himself, spitting bits of

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napkin into the air, "this'll never do."

"Baxter." It was Rockhurst. "I have your equipment on the lamp table." He gestured at a table in the center of the room. "You can start as soon as the Governor gets back."

"Of course," Willis grated. He felt the fire from his gullet to his stomach—as if an army of Cossacks had ridden through his mouth, throat and esophagus, hacking at the delicate membranes with their scimitars all the way down. "Let me get another drink."

Rockhurst nodded.

Willis upended another Scotch.

Willis was unaware of the passage of any time but presently he saw Rockhurst walk out into the room, his hands over his head, and say in a commanding stage-announcer voice, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen and ladies, the live entertainment I promised you is about to begin. Please find a seat along the walls and along the buffet. We're about to see the altogether beautiful Sweet Anny in the altogether!"

Rockhurst's last words formed a crescendo that seemed to sweep everyone to the edge of the room. There was a tidal wave of applause. The lights dimmed, then went out completely—except for a spotlight's circle in the center of the room. In the dim light, Willis saw the Governor, followed by another man, entering the room to occupy the best and closest seat to the site of the action.

Willis pawed his nose like a dog, then walked out into the middle of the spotlight. The faces which looked up at him from the other side of that bright light were eager and waiting.

"Conjuring up a demon is a serious thing," Willis began. He swallowed, trying to quiet his fiery stomach. There were sniggers; someone had programmed 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' to play at this moment.

"The first thing I have to do," Willis went on, "is make a pentagram in a circle. It's very important that all the lines be solid—otherwise the demon we summon will be able to work through and control *us*, rather than the other way around." He looked to the lamp table for some chalk, but a man—the one who had followed Asque into the room—handed it to him.

"Here you are, professor."

The voice sounded familiar. Willis peered through the dimness into the man's heavy jowled face—and nearly panicked.

It was Larry Hawthorne!

"What are you doing here?" Willis whispered, taking a step backward.

He had visions of police entering the house, invited by Hawthorne, to make arrests that would result in the scandal of the century—to say nothing of the ruin it would certainly mean for Willis's career.

But then he remembered that Hawthorne was a free man only because the police had not been able to locate Anathae to press charges of attempted rape against him.[2] Hawthorne could not very well afford to call in the boys in blue with Anathae around.

Willis's arch rival merely said, with a smile that was malicious even in the darkness, "I couldn't miss this chance to see you perform."

Willis stumbled back to the center of the spotlight, wondering if perhaps he should announce that he was ill and could not go on. But it was already too late—the audience was getting uneasy.

2. You really *should* have read "A Personal Demon," poor mystified Reader.

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"C'mon," somebody yelled.

"Enough stalling," someone else shrilled.

So Willis began drawing the pentagram and the circle, and somehow managed to keep up his running patter: "Of course, if we fail to summon this demon, we must consign its spirit to Hell forever—lest it use this spot at a later time to enter our world and wreack havoc."

Willis completed his drawing, faced the four quarters of the compass, began to intone.

"Eiris sazun idisi, sazun hera duoder." These were the wrong words, to be sure—but then, this was no real conjuring. Anathae was to appear when Willis ended this chant—an old pagan charm—and it was just as well, now, since he didn't want Hawthorne to hear the authentic version again anyway. *"Suma hapt heptidun, suma heri lezidun."*

"That's not right!" Hawthorne's voice cut through the silence.

"Shut up!" came Asque's tenor. "He knows what he's doing!"

"Suma clubodun umbi cuoniouuidi.

"Insprinc haptbandun, inuar uigandun."

Willis waited.

The audience waited.

Hawthorne waited with baited breath.

Nothing happened.

Nothing.

No blinding flash, no cloud of smoke, no nude Anathae stepping out in horns and tail.

Hawthorne shouldered past Willis to take the spotlight, eyes gleaming. "Since Professor Baxter cannot summon up his demon, it is now time to consign that demon's spirit to Hell forever. I have the incantation written down here—and if Baxter can't or won't read it properly, *I will!*"

But just as Hawthorne finished speaking, there was a blinding flash of light and a billowing of smoke that encompassed a good part of the audience.

Better late than never, Willis thought.

But as the smoke cleared away, there was still no nude Anathae in the center of the pentagram. Instead, there was a two-hundred pound pig—dressed in a pearl-grey suit.

Everyone began to talk at once.

"What the hell?" somebody yelled. "Where's the girl?"

A baritone voice thundered, "You're supposed to give us Sweet Anny."

Another voice: "Is this some kind of joke?"

Hawthorne cursed. Suddenly everyone was milling around and the room seemed full again. The lights went back on. Willis found that the piece of chalk he'd been holding had broken in two; he stuck the pieces in his pocket as Rockhurst appeared out of nowhere and grabbed him by the arm.

"Come with me, Baxter," Rockhurst said *soto voice*. Then, to the people milling around: "Everything will be all right in a few moments, folks. Just a little levity to lighten up our evening. Ha, ha."

His grip tightened on Willis's arm and Willis found himself propelled along the floor toward the side of the room.

"What's the idea?" Rockhurst asked. "Where's Anny? Is that pig supposed to be some sort of joke, dressed up like the Governor like that? If so, I can tell you now that Izzy doesn't take kindly—"

"Honestly," Willis interrupted, "I'm as much in the dark—"

"Look out!" someone yelled, adding

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"The pig!"—as if that explained something.

In all the confusion, many of the people had instinctively crowded to the center of the room. The pig, somewhere in their midst, was not to be seen. Not in the flesh, that is—although his presence was easy to follow, as guest after guest, and lady after lady, began to fall. Like the majestic Redwoods of the high Rockies, sabotaged from below by the trusty woodsman's ax, they toppled forward, crashing through other timber, to fall to the floor of the woods—or just to the floor—with a resounding crash.

"The Governor," Rockhurst said. "Where's Governor Asque? If you've offended him with your prank—"

"Don't push!" came a woman's voice from the crowd. "Don't push. Goddamn it, I said don't *push!*"

There is a sound which is unlike any other sound—the sound of a balled first connecting. No other sound sounds quite so much like that sound sounds.

Willis heard that very distinctive sound.

"Baxter," Rockhurst said, "I'm going to hold you personally responsible—"

The crowd—flailing arms, rushing feet, crushing torsos—surged into their corner of the room and both Willis and Rockhurst were pushed against the wall.

Rockhurst lost his grip on Willis's arm and the crowd easily parted them. Willis was again slammed to the wall by the surge of the partygoers and lost his footing; he sank beneath the waves of the moving people like a ruptured rubber duck.

It was not so bad, really, down below. His head was swimming, more from the blows he had received than the alcohol he had consumed. In fact, he felt almost sobered. Instinctively, he had rolled himself into a ball for fear that the stampeding people would trample him, and closed his eyes. He opened one of them again when this did not occur to see what was protecting him.

At first all he saw was a big brown loafer. The shoe was not on a foot; it was on the back hoof of the pig. The pig was standing between Willis and the crowd; whenever the mob surged in their direction, the pig put its weight behind its hooves and pushed back. Surprisingly, this seemed to work.

The pig turned to Willis. "Hey," it said, "are you responsible for this?"

Willis shook his head in disbelief. Only a moment before, he would have been willing to swear that the evening's series of unexpected events had left him relatively sober, despite the quantity of alcohol he had consumed. But apparently not.

Willis opened both eyes to study the pig. "I think I get it," Willis said to himself.

"Did you change me into this?" the pig asked, trying to raise an unpickled pig knuckle threateningly. Tears seemed to be flowing from its grey eyes.

"No, Governor," Willis said. "It's not my fault. Believe me!"

"I don't give a flying fuck whose *fault* it is, Baxter. You get me back to my old self immediately, or I'll initiate proceedings to restore the death penalty in this state!"

Willis put his hand over the pig's snout. "Just keep quiet and I'll do what I can. You probably won't believe how this happened—"

The pig shook away Willis's hand and muttered, "There's precious little I wouldn't believe right now. But *you*

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can believe that, unless you do something quickly, your returns will be audited and reaudited, your taxes will be reassessed, you'll be investigated, harrassed and hounded until—"

"First," Willis said, again grabbing the pig's snout, "we have to find Anathae. She could undo it in a minute."

The Governor again freed his snout from Willis' grip. "That girl-friend of yours? She's gone off with your assistant, Hoffbug."

"Hawthorne?"

"Yeah, Hawthorne. As soon as the lights went back on, he headed back for where we'd left her. I saw him leading her out the front door just a few minutes ago."

Willis didn't know what to think. On the one hand, it seemed unlikely that Anathae would follow Hawthorne anywhere, for any reason—but, on the other, why sould the Governor—the pig—lie to him?

The crowd surged towards them again and the pig—the Governor—had to put his back into keeping the people away. The battle suddenly took on a new dimension as some of the participants discovered the plates of cheese, ham, pastrami, corned beef, thin-sliced salami, chopped liver, hors d'oeuvres and salad—which they promptly began to hurl at each other. There were few actually brought down by this aerial barrage, but many were hit.

The pig turned back to Willis. "How does this Hawthorne fit in?"

So, as quickly as he could under the circumstances, Willis told the governor about Hawthorne, about Anathae, and then offered the theory that Hawthorne—for some reason yet to be fathomed—had turned the Governor into a pig. "That's the best guess I can make," Willis said, "although I'm a little puzzled as to why Anny went with him. They're not, as I said, very good friends."

"Then why'd he give her her necklace back?"

"Necklace?"

"Yeah," the pig said. "When I was taking her to the other room, he stepped out from a side door, put a necklace over her head and said, 'Here, you forgot this.' Then he told me he was your assistant, that he'd take her the rest of the way. She didn't object, so I let him."

Willis tried to puzzle it out but couldn't—for the moment. "We have to find Anny," he said. "She's the only one who might be able to help you."

"I guess we've got to look up this Hawthorne, then," the hog said. "Know where we might find him?"

"I know where he lives," Willis said. "We could start there."

The governor eyed the surging, tumbling, flailing, fighting crowd. "You hit 'em high," he said, "I'll hit 'em low." He then gave forth a high-pitched squeal and plunged into the throng. Several women made high-pitched squeals. Willis, rising to his feet and the occasion, staggered after the hog, stepping over the men and women it had knocked down in its flight toward the front door. Willis lurched through the door of the parlor into the foyer, colliding again with another portable bar.

"The pig! The pig!" something yelled. "The pig's getting away!"

"So's the guy responsible for this," someone else bellowed. "That magician—look!"

Amid the crashing and cursing, the front door was pulled opened. Willis saw, before he and the pig ran out into the darkness, that a number of the people (how many make a posse?

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how many a lynch mob? never mind—a *number* of people) had detached themselves from the battle, with the obvious intent of bringing the battle to them.

Willis slammed the door on the way out and fumbled in his pockets for his keys. He found them just as he remembered that he had not come to the party in his little green Volks—Anathae, with her demoncraft, had transported them both to Rockhurst's doorstep.

"Glug," he said.

"What?" the hog asked.

"Nothing."

"Sounded like you said 'glug'," the Governor said.

"Never mind," Willis said. "We're going to have to run for it." And with that, Willis started off at a lope toward the front gate of the Rockhurst estate. The pig followed right behind. Behind the two, a few scant seconds later, the front door of the Manse opened and a small but angry mob of men and women poured out. "There they go! Get 'em!"

Willis continued running toward the gate. The hog also continued running, but turned his head to look back at the people.

"They're coming after us," Asque said, redoubling his speed and passing Willis. "I think that's Rockhurst swinging a bottle over his head."

"Good grief," Willis replied as he passed the governor.

"Where's your car, Baxter?" the pig asked as he was coming by.

"That's what I was glugging about—I didn't bring one," Willis answered as a new burst of speed put him out ahead.

The gate was just in front of them. The hog was waiting, none too patiently, as Willis came up and pushed it open. "Here they come," Asque said, "Run for it. Along Seneca. Traffic's got to get thinner in a minute—then we can cross and hide in the woods."

Willis and the hog ran between the hedge and the street, looking for a break in the cars and trucks that were whizzing by. Willis glanced back toward the gate where the vigilante

"There they are!" came a shout.

"Into the street!" Willis yelled, jumping out into the glaring headlights of an oncoming car. Horns sounded, brakes squealed and a taxi came to an abrupt halt just inches short of the unlikely pair. The driver—a dark shadow behind the lights—leaned out his window and shouted, "You trying to kill yourself, or what?"

Willis didn't answer. He ran to the side of the cab, opened the door and forced Asque in. He turned to see the mob surging in their direction, then hopped in himself. "Drive!" he yelled, locking his door.

The driver turned around in his seat. He was twentyish man with long hair, a Fu Manchu moustache and a beard. "Sorry," he said, "can't do it. I'm on call. If you like—hey, is that a pig?"

"Yes," Willis answered, his heart sinking. He looked out the window and saw that the angry-faced people were closing on them.

"Far fucking out," the driver said. He turned back around and pulled his cab out into the traffic, forcing his way into the left lane. "The guys aren't going to believe this one. Uh, where you want to go?"

Willis breathed more easily. Most of the members of the pursuing crowd stopped. A few of the heartier, or angrier, members continued the chase, but even they gave up as the cab cruised blithely through a red light.

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"Or do you just want to ride around?" the cab driver asked when Willis did not reply. "Just you and your pig?"

"Uh, no," Willis said. "Take us to the Idylwood Apartments, just off the P.U. campus. Best way to go—"

"I know the way," the driver said. "A pig. This is the first time I ever carried a pig in my cab. I bet there are guys hack tewnty, thirty years and never carry a pig." The driver seemed to be making the last statements to himself. But then, to Willis, he said, "It'd be somewhere between $12 and $13 on the meter—but I'll high-flag you for $9."

"Fine," Willis said.

The driver picked up his hand mike then and spoke into the receiver noise. "Twelve, twelve," he said.

"Twelve, c'mon," the receiver sputtered.

"Turn me around on that Arrowhead Avenue, I picked up a flag."

"Sure thing, dirty dozen," the receiver said.

They all rode in comparative silence for a while. The only sounds were the squawk of the cab radio, the rush of musty heat from the vents under the dash, and the occassional murmurings of the driver: "A pig! If *I* can't believe it, how can I expect *them* to?"

Fewer and fewer cars passed by until, at last, the cab pulled onto Idylwood Avenue.

"Which building?" the driver asked, slowing.

"Here will be fine," Willis said, peering through the mist on the window. "In fact this is just perfect." The driver stopped the cab, turned on his emergency flashers and turned around to face Willis. Willis dug around in his pocket and at last pulled out a clip of bills. "You said $9?"

"Right," the driver said. Then, in surprise: "Hey, he's got a suit on—your pig's got a suit on. He a trained pig?"

Willis handed the driver a $10 bill and said drily, "Highly trained. This pig could be Governor.'"

The cabby laughed. "*Any* pig could be Governor of *this* state," he said loudly as he turned back to get a single in change. He laid the bill on Willis's hand expectantly.

"We'll just keep that change," Asque said. "Open the door, Baxter—the company in here's not fit for pigs."

The cabby did a double-take, but Willis didn't wait for the exchange of any further repartees. He jerked open the door and nearly fell onto the pavement as Asque pushed him out of the cab. There was a thud as the Governor jumped to the sidewalk, and Willis turned quickly and shut the door.

The cabby stuck his head out the window. "A ventriloquist act, right?"

"Right," Willis said, putting the dollar bill in the cabby's hand.

"Even a pig likes a little respect," Asque shouted. "Especially *this* pig!"

"You don't even move your lips," the driver said.

"Years of practice," Willis replied.

The cab pulled away. With, perhaps, unnatural speed—although, with a cab, who is to say?

Asque, sputtering and mumbling, turned in time to see Willis going down the long walk toward one of the highrises. The hog scampered after him, yelling at the top of his lungs, "You're not going to lose me, Baxter!"

Willis turned on him so fast that the Governor's hooves skidded on the pavement as he came to a stop.

"Shut up! This is where Hawthorne lives—and my guess is he has

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Anathae there with him. She's the only one I know who can possibly do you any good—and if you give us away with your shouting, Hawthorne's liable to take her down in the elevator while we're going up. And then we'll probably never find her."

Asque shut his mouth with a snap and looked mournfully up at Willis. The Governor didn't have just any pig's face, Willis realized. There were recognizable characteristics about it—a certain sculpturing about the cheekbones, a kind of fullness just under the eyes. To anyone looking for the resemblance, it was blatantly obvious that this hog—this mountain of pink flesh in a pearl-grey suit—was Governor Isador Asque.

Willis turned to the outside door and opened it; he held it for the Governor. "Not a sound," he said, his fingers to his lips. Asque nodded so contritely that Willis was tempted to pat him on the head—but he resisted the temptation.

"It's three steps up to the foyer," Willis whispered. "Can you make it?"

Asque snorted. "Just because I'm a pig doesn't mean I'm an invalid."

Willis started up the stairs, the pig behind him, thanking his lucky stars that there was no one around to ask what a man and pig were doing tip-toeing through the foyer.

"Did you say something, sir?" a strange voice asked.

Willis started. There was a room, off to the side, with a large archway cut over a long counter-top. This would be, Willis realized, where the high-rise dwellers collected their mail. Behind the counter was a switchboard; behind the switchboard was a man. This man was the source of the strange voice.

Fortunately, Willis realized, the man—so long as he did not stand up—could only see Willis from about the waist up. Which meant he could not see the Governor.

"Uh," Willis said, "just mumbling to myself. Which way is the elevator?"

"Are you a resident, sir?" the man asked, putting a magazine he had been reading aside.

"No," Willis answered. "I'm an associate of Professor Hawthorne's."

"Ah," the man said. "He just came in—with one of his students, I believe. Should I ring and tell him you're coming?"

"No!" Willis said, rather too hastily. Quickly he added, "He's expecting us."

" 'Us'?"

"Me. He's expecting me. Which way did you say the elevator was?"

"Down the hall to your left." The man seemed about to say something else, but Willis turned and walked down the hall indicated and out of view.

The Governor, who'd frozen at the sound of the man's voice, took a few cautious steps. Nothing happened, so he took a few more. As he rounded the corner the Governor almost collided with Willis, who was tip-toeing back.

Willis peered around the corner; the man was once again absorbed in reading his magazine.

"That was close," Asque whispered. Willis said nothing but turned back down the hallway; the pig fell in behind him. The hall was carpeted in worn yellow Herculon which muted their foot- and hoof-steps.

There were two elevators. Willis pushed a button and the one on the left opened immediately. Seeing no one inside, he gave a sigh of relief and stepped in. When the hog was safely inside with him, Willis pushed

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the bottom marked '11' and the door closed. The light over the door went from 'L' to '1' with several accompanying squeaks and shudders, but then the elevator picked up speed and the light went from 1 to 2 and from 2 to 3 quickly, paused at 4 and stopped—"Oh, no," Willis muttered —on 5.

Three people—two men and a woman—were on the other side of the door when it opened. The woman, who was exceptionally thin, said, "Down?"

"No, Linda," said one of the men, who had a lop-sided grin, "the arrow's up. We'll have to wait for the next one going down."

"Say, Dave," said the second man, who had an untrimmed beard and moustache, pointing at the pig, "what's that?"

Willis tried to assume the air of a disinterested elevator passenger; when the man pointed, Willis looked down at the Governor, but then turned back to gazing at the elevator buttons as if pigs in elevators were not worth talking about.

"Oh," said the woman, moving her foot out of the elevator. "It looks like a pig."

"That's what it looks like to me, too, Rich," the man with the grin said. "But it's got clothes on."

The man with the beard and moustache blocked the closing of the elevators doors by quickly pushing the 'hold' button on the outside wall. He eyed Willis keenly. "That your pig?"

Willis looked down at the Governor again before he said, "Heavens, no. He got on at the second floor."

Asque, taking his cue from Willis, sat on his haunches in the middle of the elevator, staring at nothing in particular.

"Oh," the man said, taking his hand off the hold button.

"What did he say?" the woman asked.

"He said the pig got on at the second floor."

Mercifully, the door closed and the elevator ascended.

A FEW MOMENTS LATER, Willis and the Governor stood outside apartment 1102. Willis, without ado, put his ear up against the door and quietly tried the knob.

"Someone's in there crying," he said, his face darkening. "It's probably Anny. And the door's locked."

"If she can do what you say she can, you have the Governor's personal permission to break down this door." Asque's tiny grey eyes glittered.

"I can't break down this door. It's solid. I'm not exactly *built* for breaking doors down." Willis forwned and searched through his pockets. He came up with a pen, a piece of chalk, a package of gum (with two sticks still in it) and, finally, his wallet.

"You got a key?" Asque snorted.

"Something almost as good," Willis said, flipping through the plastic pages of his billfold. He drew out a card. "BankAmericard comes in handy—even if you're not paid up." He pushed the card through the crack between the door and the latch in the molding. There was a click, and the door to Hawthorne's apartment eased slowly open.

Larry Hawthorne sat in a fetal position on the floor in the corner of his living room. He was sobbing hysterically; his face was pasty white, his whole body was trembling, his green shirt and black pants were soaked with sweat and his long black hair hung in disarray.

The room was bathed in abnormally

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bright light. And, even through the small crack in the door, Willis could feel intense heat. Irrationally, he wondered if Hawthorne owned stock in one of the power companies.

Before the door was even half opened, Asque pushed past Willis and ran into the room—but them jumped back, squealing with fright. "Don't go in!" he yelled to Willis—and then, before he could help himself, he wet his pants.

Willis looked at the sharp shadows cast on the peeling paint on the wall—and then realized that the paint was in the process of peeling before his very eyes. Heedless of the Governor's warning, he threw open the door—and saw, in the middle of the room, the source of the light and heat.

It was a flowing, congealing man—a huge giant, made of living fire—in the middle of a pentagram chalked onto the bare parquet. Its eyes were wide, the staring eyes of a madman; there was irrational hatred of all living things in them, a hint of gleeful amusement at maiming and torturing, the promise of pain and death, the certainty of the triumph of malevolence and evil.

The apparition swayed and fluttered like a candle, reaching out with its long sinuous fingers for Willis.

Hawthorne slithered across the polished floor and grabbed Willis by the ankles. "Won't work," Hawthorne mumbled. "I tried—oh, God in Heavan, I tried! Can't send him back. Says he'll worth through. Send him back, Willis—I promise, I swear, I'll never conjur again! I swear it!" Suddenly he let go of Willis and slumped back to the floor.

Willis looked wildly around the room and caught sight of Anathae lying on a couch beyond the pentagram. She still wore the sparkling red dress, but around her neck was a silver necklace bearing an inscribed silver disc. She appeared to be sleeping.

"Anathae!" Willis yelled. Very slowly, she turned her head; her curls spilled over the edge of the white leather couch. Willis saw that her eyes were—and had been—open all along. She smiled weakly.

"Wil." Her voice was strained, as if she had difficulty speaking. "I can't move with this medallion on. Can't do anything. And look at the pentagram—*look at the pentagram!*"

Willis did as he was told. A line in the pentagram was smudged—almost broken.

"Oh no," he muttered.

Obviously, Hawthorne's unwary foot had stepped on the line—possibly even while leading Anathae into the apartment.

"Oh no," he said again as a tentacle of fire grew from the flaming apparition and edged toward the smudge.

But then he realized that he was till holding his BankAmericard, his wallet, a pen, a package of gum with two sticks still in it—and a piece of chalk!

Willis dropped to his knees. "Spare me, Evil One! Please spare me!"

A stench filled the room as the apparition spoke. *"I would eat your soul. Of what other use could you be to me, puny mortal?"*

"Humans have served you before, O Prince of Darkness," Willis said, bowing before the fiery man. "Spare me and let me serve you as they have."

The flickering fire in the pentagram glared at Willis and held out its hands towards him. *"I have no use for you."*

Willis, the sweat from his body wilting his collar, continued to make bowing motions toward the flaming

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giant—and then reached out to the smudged line in the pentagram. He quickly made the line clear and distinct again with his piece of chalk.

"Gotcha!" he said.

The flaming man howled a howl that would make a bansee's sound like a baby's coo. Every square inch within the pentagram burst into a flame so intense that it knocked Willis over backwards. Too late, he saw that the pentagram was smudged in yet another place—one close to the couch where Anathae lay helpless.

Willis hopped to his feet and sprinted like a quarterback toward her. At the last minute, he dodged the fiery fingers that had slipped through the smudge and were reaching for him, tripped on a throw-rug, fell full over Anathae and the couch to catapult headlong into a messy pile of laundry on the floor. He turned a somersault and landed on his back.

"I didn't know I could do that," he said.

"The medallion," Anathae's voice said from the couch, strained almost beyond recognition.

Willis pulled himself to his feet in time to see the fiery man reaching toward Anathae. "No!" Willis yelled. He pulled the necklace over Anathae's head and threw it at the fiery form.

There was a puff of smoke. And then, all at once, if was very quiet. The apparition had vanished.

But evidence that it had been there was left behind—peeling paint, scortched spots on the floor and ceiling, and the lingering smell of brimstone.

Anathae sat up slowly, got to her feet and stood statuelike for a moment, then pointed at Hawthorne—who still lay sobbing near the hog. "He did this," she said imperiously, "and he'll pay. He had it all set up so you'd have to consign my spirit to Hell forever—or he'd do it himself."

"I know," Willis said.

Anathae's hands moved through the air like a karateka's, save that her fingers remained wide-spread, and in a flash, Hawthorne vanished—and in his place a large slug appeared. The light, dimmer by far than the light which had so recently illuminated the room, glanced off its shiny grey body. The slug oozed along the floor, which it touched occasionally with its feelers.

Willis stumbled around the couch.

"Larry!" he yelled. "My God."

"And now," Anathae said, turning, "it's time to take care of this pig of a Governor."

Asque, not liking the tone of her voice, but unable to move, said, "No! Please! Don't hurt me!"

Anathae went on: "This uncouth, vulgar, ungentlemanly, racist, insulting, bigoted degrading pig of a Governor."

She pointed a long slender finger at the pig—and then he, too, was gone.

"He's home," she said. Turning to Willis: "And we should be, too."

IMMEDIATELY THEREAFTER, Willis found himself holding her close and lying on his bed. In his old familiar bedroom. With the cluttered mahogany chest of drawers and the lace panties on the night table.

"Anny," he said, his heart pounding, "the Governor—"

"—is back to his old self with a stomach full of whiskey. Right now Rockhurst is trying to slap him awake to get him home before the Governor's wife calls and makes a big stink."

Willis propped himself up on his elbows. "There's still one thing I

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don't quite understand. Why did Hawthorne turn the Governor into a pig?"

"*He* didn't turn Asque into a pig," Anathae said. "*I* did."

"*You*? But why?"

"I thought maybe a pig's-eye-view of the world would improve certain aspects of his personality." She sighed. "It probably didn't, though."

"Especially since he probably won't remember much of this," Willis said. "Uh, will he?"

Anathae shrugged. "He will, but he probably won't believe it—one tends to think of one's drunken experiences as, well, one's drunken experiences. And if he believes it, he certainly won't tell anyone about it. But it'll be there, like a hard-to-forget nightmare in his mind—so he'll probably keep Rockhurst from making any complaints to the Dean about our performance."

"Well, that's a relief," Willis said, touching her shoulder softly. "But, really, Anny—a pig! You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I'm not, though," she said, her fingers tickling the hair on his chest. "If it hadn't been for that, Hawthorne would have had what he wanted. That medallion rendered me powerless. He wanted our magic trick to fail so that you'd be forced to read the incantation. Luckily, I'd already put my spell on the Governor and timed it to your chant. When the pig appeared, it made it look like you'd done something."

Willis allowed himself to lie back in bed without removing his hand from Anathae's shoulder. "Anny, there's just one more thing."

"What?"

"Larry," he said. When the girl-demon did not reply, he added, "You just can't *leave* him like that."

"A slug? Why not? It suits him—he deserves it." She snuggled even closer to Willis and put her arms around him.

"Anny," the professor said, his hands savoring the soft, smooth warmth of her back, "Anny . . . you . . . we . . . just . . . *can't*."

Anathae sighed. "All right, Wil. I'll turn him back—only because you want me to. But is it okay with you if I make it so that the next time he tries to mess with magic, he'll stick his finger on the top of his head and start singing something from 'Madam Butterfly'?"

Willis laughed. "Sure," he said, drawing her closer still.

Anathae sighed again. "Anything for you, Wil." She snapped her fingers, mumbled a few words, then slipped a hand behind his neck. "Anything."

With her free hand, the girl-demon made a gesture at the bedroom light.

The light went out just as her lips found his.

—MICHAEL F. X. MILHAUS

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J. J. Russ made his professional debut here with "The Interview" (January, 1974); he returns with a strangely whimsical story about a wood-carver and his creation—

PINNOKE

J. J. RUSS

Illustrated by Roy Comiskey

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER, me of all people. But it's not like the old days when the dummies could have nothing between their legs. We may not have gotten back to codpieces yet, but they've got to at least have a convincing-looking bump under their tight trousers. It's one of the more important accessories that goes with shaped suits and flaring ties. But this time I went too far. Much. I made one physically complete in all particulars. I never would have carved Pinnoke's manhood with such elaborate detail if I had known what I was getting into. I only did it for my art.

You say carving mannequins isn't art? Then you're ignorant. I work in the line of great artists, Michelangelo, Bernini, Rodin! I'm not talking about hackwork, but the custom masterpieces that I carve to order for those Fifth Avenue custom tailors. I have a special empathy with wood.

On this one they planned to put some of the latest threads; ruffled shirt, flowered pants, and so on. But they didn't want any question about the gender of the ensemble. Square jaw, they ordered, strong nose, narrow hips, heavy and slightly hunched shoulders. It's understandable how I got carried away, isn't it? It took me half the night to chisel, gouge and sandpaper Pinnoke's piney crotch into a replica of what most men take for granted. They asked for a *man*, didn't they? I fell asleep in my chair while the last paint was drying.

I suppose you could say that Pinnoke (the first name I thought of, since *Pinnochio* sounded like lisps and limp wrists) came alive because of the detail I carved into his male organs. You might hypothesize the power of sublimated sexuality; according to Dr. Schlagobers, my former Park Avenue shrink, that's the source of everything. I don't know. All I can say is that it was the first time I dared to carve a phallus on one of my commercial pine dummies and also the first time any of them acted frisky. And I could have done without that kind of success. With the problems I'd had myself I should have known better. But who learns from experience?

Pinnoke woke up first, if you can call it that, but it was no contest because he didn't have to sleep. By the time I opened my eyes he was already sitting on the arm of my chair, picking fine splinters from his armpits.

"Daddy!" he squawked. "At last!

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Can you get me some clothes?"

"Huh?" I rubbed my eyes hard, but he didn't disappear.

"Some clothes. Shirt, pants?"

"What? What?" I wasn't as dumb as I sounded. I realized immediately what had happened but I pretended to be confused. I had to protect my interests. Pinnoke's clothes were supposed to be supplied by St. Laurent's Haberdasher, but the way things looked now I'd be lucky if they even paid me for my work. I tried to stall.

"What are you doing up?" I said reproachfully. "You're not supposed to be alive."

"Don't blame me. I didn't ask for it."

"How can I sell you like this? It's ridiculous. I might not even get my expenses back and now you're bugging me for a wardrobe." Pinnoke hung his shiny head.

"Sorry . . . but you're my father, aren't you?"

"Well—"

He'd found my weakness and pressed on: "You made me, didn't you? Dragged me into this world?"

"Well, not exactly . . ."

"Then who else?"

"All right, all right." He had me trapped. "But I didn't mean—"

"Mean, shmean. You're my Daddy." He tried to wrap his jointed arms around me, but I pushed him back.

"So what? If you want clothes go buy them and stop bothering me." I realized if I couldn't sell him I'd better get rid of him fast. "I don't owe you—"

"Oh, no! You created me. You alone, not even a mother. I'm all your responsibility, and you can't expect me to walk around like this." He stood up and started for the door. "But if you do, okay. I'll tell eve-

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rybody how you treat your son."

Obviously I wasn't going to talk him out of his rights. But there were other ways. Pinnoke had no birth certificate. Nobody could say he was ever born. It would be no problem for me to dispose of his body; I might even be able to re-use some parts later on. I grabbed a gouge and a rasp file and heaved myself out of the chair.

"The lord giveth and the lord taketh away . . ." I intoned.

Pinnoke clattered towards me on his wooden heels. I was shocked at his agility. He raised both of his hard hands in a threatening gesture.

"I warn you, I know karate." He seemed transformed. His lips hardly moved when he spoke, and it gave him an impression of toughness, as if he were muttering through a cigarette butt. "I'm strong and hard and I'll whip your ass."

He sounded as if he meant it. I patted the flab over my sagging belly. "You wouldn't hurt your old Dad, would you son?"

And that's how I became a father.

It wasn't as bad as I expected. Pinnoke and I had a lot in common. If he wasn't the Norman Rockwell-typical son, neither was he as tough as he sounded at first. He was only like a walking tape recorder, reeling out sounds that were meaningless to him. There were consolations. Pinnoke *needed* me to survive, to grow, to learn. And he had more to learn that you might think.

I sent him to college. Don't laugh; he was too big for high school much less anything lower. In college he didn't have to talk to anybody. He just settled his painted posterior in a lecture seat and lost himself in a sea of apparently similar student bodies. His memory was photographic and phonographic. Everything should have been fine. But he began to think, a practice to be avoided by collegiate freshmen at all costs.

After three weeks of classes he came to me looking troubled. True, his face showed no dent in its haughtily masculine ruggedness, and his blue glass eyes were as dry as ever. But the grain of the wood at the corners of his mouth seemed a bit rougher and gnarled. He looked warped at the back.

"Dad, I've noticed something."

"Hmmm." I was rushing through a hackwork job, chiseling a size six bikini teen for Tracy's. Dull, but profitable.

"Like that one you're carving there. Forty-eight point oh-eight percent of the people I see have these lumps on their chests. What's wrong with them?"

"Them?" I dropped my mallet and chisel. Pinnoke was even more like me than I expected; I hoped he wouldn't have to make the same mistakes. I tried to sound calm. "Them? Oh, they're women, that's all. They can't help it." Pinnoke maintained a silence that demanded filling. "And that's not all that's wrong with them either . . ."

He wanted to know everything. So I told him all about the birds and the bees—and the carpenter. I drew pictures and assembled models and proved to Pinnoke that he had no need for women, any more than he needed food, drink, sleep or washrooms. He was beyond all temptations of the flesh. Or so I thought.

For a while it seemed that I was right. Pinnoke unwarped. He was never at a loss. His grades broke all the curves. He charmed everyone he met with his upright stance and fixed, confident smile. I began to take a

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personal pride in his achievements and think of his future. He was a natural for politics, if I could forge the proper documents; he might even become president.

One typically tranquil evening Pinnoke sat reading, sailing through a biology text, memorizing it at ten pages a minute. Occasionally he polished his eyes with his sleeve, a nervous habit that he was careful to avoid in public. Suddenly he closed the book with a bang.

"Dad? Dad?"

"Uhuh."

"You remember those women?"

"Women? Which women?" I really had forgotten all about them.

"Women women. You know, the ones with the lumpy chests and the rest. Something's the matter."

"What? With them? With their chests?"

"No, with me. They make me feel funny."

I snorted. "You? Feel?" But I began to feel pretty uneasy myself. It reminded me too much of my own old problems. Women. I thought I was all over that nonsense, but my anxiety was trying to tell me something I didn't want to hear. If I couldn't feel anything, neither could Pinnoke. "You *can't* feel anything! You don't have the hormones, the cells . . ."

"Yes I can! They make me feel it!"

My mind wandered off. Would I be stuck with a wooden Don Juan? What would the police do to a cellulose sex fiend? What would they do to his father?

But of course I was letting my imagination get the best of me. It wasn't possible that Pinnoke could have the feelings he claimed, at least not spontaneously. We had a long talk, and it turned out that his "feelings" didn't arise unprovoked. He had a fatal attraction for voluptous co-eds, and they were doing their best to teach him what he *should* feel. They apparently found in his stiff neck and wooden features, in the supercilious smile I had so artfully carved, something implacably masculine and reassuring. When he paid them no attention at all it greatly added to his fascination. No doubt about it, he was the epitome of cool. Whatever the feminine logic of the matter, soon he was beset by tons of soft and hungry womanflesh, attractively packaged in separate bodies of assorted shape and texture. They smiled at him, flattered him. They leaned against his stony arm and shoulder. They made it abundantly clear that they would do anything he wanted, with veiled hints about what his desires should be. He was being brainwashed into libido. But of course he really had none at all.

I made the mistake of laughing. There was nothing to worry about. I assured him that his construction made him physically immune, whatever he imagined in his cask of a head. When he told me he would have his first date later that night I laughed again.

"Have fun, have fun. But don't tease the poor girl too much."

"Do you think I should risk it? From what you've said—"

"Sure, go on, enjoy yourself if you can. What could happen? If she finds out about you, nobody will believe her anyway."

"But Dad! Remember, they make me feel it! Down where you carved my—"

"Sure, sure." I decided to humor him. "If you feel it, you feel it."

"Okay Dad, since you say so . . ."

I had my chance and I muffed it.

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The next thing I knew, Pinnoke was shaking me out of my sleep about three in the morning. He was pounding his knobby fists on my chest and shouting, "Wake up! Wake up!"

Even through gummy night eyes I could see that Pinnoke was a mess. His symmetrical face was covered with convex red imprints of full lips. His collar was torn, his glistening neck scratched at the back so that small splinters bristled from the marks. Just as I expected. I yawned.

"Oh Pinnoke, I told you to take it easy. These women can be very excitable—"

"What are you going to do about it? What? You've got me into this sex mess. What are you going to do about it now?"

"What mess? There's nothing that can happen to you. What's the matter, did she find out that you're a dummy?"

He clenched both fists and jumped up and down. "I'm not a dummy. I'm not! Marie—" There was a sound like two insane woodpeckers as Pinnoke pounded his temples with both hands. "Marie! You should see her! I can almost meet my fingers around her waist. Just under the navel she swells out, perfect! Her thighs, hips to knees, tapers like— Oh! She makes me feel it!"

"Calm yourself!" I slapped him in the face without effect.

"Oh! Her eyes, her lips. Both nipples pop up— What she does with her tongue!" He walloped himself in the forehead. "And me! What can I do?"

"Nothing. You know that."

"Nothing! You're not kidding. But Marie—she loves me and I love her. We're going to be marriied."

"Are you crazy? You know you can't do that. Remember the pictures I drew? You're made out of wood, remember? There are some things you can't do!"

"You're telling me!" He moaned and picked at his eyeballs. "It's so frustrating! I don't want to be wood any more."

"But think of the advantages! You don't know how well off you are." Poor kid, he was getting upset over the girl, and it was hopeless. He wanted something he could never have. "Look, this way you never have to eat, never have to die, never even get sick."

"I'm sick now. I feel miserable." I had to admit he looked it. If his face weren't hard, I would have sworn his cheeks were sagging a bit, bags forming under his eyes. "I feel like hell," He went on in a petulant voice. "I want to be real."

"But you are real." I knocked on his chest. "See?"

"Not really real. I want to be a real boy!"

That did it.

"Now, look, you . . . you puppet. You're nothing but a sawed, jointed, sanded, painted and polished dummy! You've got no business messing with real women—"

"Marie doesn't seem to think so."

"—And you expect too much of me. You want to be real? What do you think I am? God? I've done all I can do, and you're stuck with what you've got. You're not human, and that's all there is to it!"

"But it's not fair!" He hadn't calmed down at all. It was clear that something had to be done. I made a decision. I didn't know if Pinnoke's wooden head could be shrunk, but if we didn't try he was going to get into a whole lot of trouble. Dr. Schlagobers was expensive, but if he could help Pinnoke adjust to reality it would

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be-worth it. If he could make him forget Marie, forget sex, forget his marionette impotence.

I was totally honest with the psychiatrist and I told Pinnoke to be the same.

"You see," I said, sinking back into Dr. Schlagobers' plush black leather chair, "Pinnoke is really made out of wood, mostly pine. I carved him with my own hands, and he is physically complete in all particulars."

"Uhmhm." Dr. S. leaned forward on his oak slab of a desk, cradled his double chin in the notch of his hand, and darted his moist brown eyes from me to Pinnoke.

"But now he's not happy. He wants to be real. And especially he wants to be really male with respect to a female named Marie."

Pinnoke writhed in his chair as the doctor nodded and said, "Uhmhm. Go on."

"I thought that maybe you can help him adjust the way you helped me. Maybe better . . ." I laughed nervously, but the psychiatrist was not amused. "Like me—you remember?—he wants something he can never have . . ."

"We'll see." Dr. Schlagobers fixed Pinnoke with a penetrating gaze. "Ahmm, well, young man . . . nequin, hehe. You agree with these goals, hmm?"

Pinnoke nodded reluctantly. "Yes, doctor, whatever you say. If I can't have Marie I might as well not want her."

For a while things are better. Pinnoke stopped talking about women. His grades soared. Perhaps I should have been suspicious when I received a letter from Dr. Schlagobers that thanked me for my great tact and sensitivity in the intake meeting and promised to charge only a nominal fee because Pinnoke was such an unusual case. Perhaps I should have been suspicious, but I wasn't. After all, Pinnoke was unusual, wasn't he? Unique even?

I let the curtain of confidentiality descend. Not that Pinnoke was especially secretive. He told me how Dr. S. was on an existential kick. He considered Pinnoke's problem a symbol of our age. Think of it: An unfeeling puppet, tickled into existence by the possession of a ligneous phallus, seeking real human feeling! Pinnoke embodied a bridge between psychoanalysis and existentialism. Sex, alienation, anxiety, choice, love! But I turned a deaf ear and encouraged Pinnoke to keep these things to himself. He should confide only in his therapist.

Anyway, I was more than satisfied with the first results.

I had to have Pinnoke spike his papers and examinations with "human" errors to keep them for becoming notoriously perfect. He spent some of his inexhaustible energy playing center on the varsity football team where, knocking heads with opponent lines, he never became dazed or muffed his signals. He continued to date regularly but uneventfully. Everything seemed to be under control.

One day he swaggered home after his weekly session with Dr. Schlagobers. He grinned at me proudly and said, "I'm terminated."

"You mean—?"

"Yup. Dr. Schlagobers says I'm cured." Pinnoke's eyes glistened brightly, and his enameled teeth shone as if wet.

"Congratulations!" I was delighted. At last the nightmare was over; Pinnoke could begin to repay me for all my troubles. "So you've given up at last and accepted—"

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"Given up, nothing," he chortled. "I'm a real boy! Here, feel." He pinched a fold of skin on his upper arm. He made a wobbly muscle. He had me punch him in a soft stomach. He stuck out a dripping tongue."

I was furious. He'd never even make senator like this. Never.

"Not again! That sonofabitch Schlagobers." I dailed the psychiatrist's office and bullied my way past ranks of answering services, until . . .

"Ehh? Hello. This is Dr. Schlag—"

"You traitor! What did you do to my son? He says he's real!"

"Quiet, please," he said in an unctuously professional voice. "I'm with a patient." He cleared his throat. "Now yes, it's time. I've cured your son of his delusions. Quite a delusional system it was, too. I'm writing a paper—"

"Delusions? What delusions?" But he wasn't listening.

". . . And I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you personally for your tact and understanding. Rarely do patients as sick as Pinnoke agree to see a pyschiatrist voluntarily. If you hadn't pretended to accept his psychosis at face value when you first brought him to me, I doubt that we would have been successful."

"Quack!" I spat into the phone and hung up. Pinnoke was sprawled on the couch, enjoying his new suppleness, chuckling.

"Oho," he said. "I wish you could see your face."

"How did it happen? It's not possible."

"Oh yes it is. Just as much as me coming alive in the first place. Dr. S. just convinced me that I'm really human. Gradually, of course. Not until today did I really feel like it. I was complaining again about Marie and my impotence—there, now I can say it—but something seemed different. Suddenly Schlagobers pointed to my pants and shouted: 'Ausgezeichnet! You're cured.' And, as you can see, I really am. That's all."

"That's all? Now your troubles start!"

"Nonsense. I've got no troubles now." Pinnoke rubbed his hands together with a leer. "Oh boy, oh boy. Just wait till tonight!"

"Tonight?"

"Marie. This time it'll be different. Just wait."

I had no choice, so that's just what I did. I waited nervously until almost four a.m. It was hopeless to try to sleep. I thought I knew what would happen, but maybe Pinnoke could make the change. Maybe it was possible after all.

Suddenly Pinnoke burst in the door, weaving in half-circles. Tears streamed down his reddened face and the smell of cheap gin filled the room.

"Too late," he blubbered. "Too late! Woe is me."

"What happened?"

He answered with fresh spurts of tears. "It's all your fault. Your fault and Schlagobers' "

"There, there." I patted Pinnoke on his slumping back and made my voice as soothing as possible. "Tell papa what happened."

"At f-first it was fine. I took her to dinner at the *Coq D'Or* and hinted that I had a surprise for her later on. But d-dinner didn't go too well. During dinner Marie told me to sit up straight, not to slump. At the theater I was anticipating Marie's bedroom and she had to tell me to stop grinning like a fool. I was surprised at how annoyed she was, but I thought nothing of it. Nothing could depress me. At last I would be able to use that thing you carved."

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"How did it work?" I still had an artist's curiosity about my own creation.

"W-work? Oh no!" More tears. "We turned off the lights and undressed just as usual. But Marie was more desirable to me than ever before. Wherever I touched, her skin seemed to jump against my fingertips. I whispered my surprise into her ear, and she giggled. We wrestled, embraced. The difference between flesh and wood! I could feel every hair of her body against mine. When she began to push me away I ignored it. I was just nervous, I thought. I wasn't used to being real."

"And then?"

"Then it happened. Just when I began to go further than I ever could before, just when I was about to *prove* I was a real man—Oh, it's all your bloody fault!"

"What's my fault? What happened?"

"She screamed, 'No, no!!' and kicked me right out of bed. She jumped up and wrapped herself in her pink terry bathrobe. She said to get out, she never wanted to see me again."

"Why not?"

"I was different. She said I slumped, I was soft and flabby, I *smelled*. She couldn't stand it any more, pretending I was the same."

"And your surprise?"

"*That* was the one thing she could get from any man. She used to think I was special, she admired me, my restraint, my straight hard body, my . . . my cool!"

So it wasn't possible after all. Pinnoke was no better than me.

"Then I cried and begged. And Marie said that was the most disgusting thing of all; she could never respect a man who cried. And I've been crying ever since. Crying and drinking until I ran out of your money and here I am!" He disintegrated into a convulsion of wrenching sobs. "I don't want to be real any more. I wish I were wooden again!"

"Can you go back? Is it possible?"

"I tried. I tried . . . but . . . t-too late!" he bawled.

The next day we told Dr. Schlagobers Pinnoke wanted his "delusion" back but were told he couldn't have it. The paper was submitted and the case was closed. Dr. S. slammed his carved door in our faces, mumbling something about existential echo.

Pinnoke doesn't think so well any more. He forgets things. He does isometric exercises in hopes of regaining the toughness of his pine torso. His grades are barely passable and he thinks only of women who, in turn, reject him. He's getting as human as I am.

But he hasn't given up on Marie yet. He wears a back brace, a girdle, and a steel supporter. His face is forced into a Bogartian snarl. Tears give him away. He still hopes, but he'll give up soon if he knows what's good for him.

He's just like his father. I've been there too, and I ought to know. Because once Dr. Schlagobers convinces you you're human you haven't got a chance. I too, tried to get back my sandpapered toughness. But once it goes it keeps going. Skin's so easy to hurt. You get fatter and softer and cry all the time until you give up. You give up if you're smart.

I'm buying Pinnoke his own carving tools. When he's ready we'll go into partnership. He's bound to have the same empathy with wood that I have. After all, isn't he my boy?

A chip off the old block.

—J. J. Russ

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Jack Haldeman's last story for us was "Laura's Theme" (June, 1975); Jack Dann's was "Fragmentary Blue" (April, 1975). Both were participants in the Guilford Writers' Conferences, and at one such conference the following story was born. Readers of the above-named stories will find aspects of each in this collaboration—a surreal study in—

LIMITS

JACK C. HALDEMAN & JACK DANN

Illustrated by Tony Gleeson

THE TELEVISION was still on when John woke up. All the lights were off and the room brightened and darkened with each scene shift. Eyes still unfocused, he watched the fuzzy images flicker—headlights in the dark, close up of a middle aged man's face sporting several days growth of beard, white hair contrasting with the darkness, long shot of waves cresting on the beach, medium shot of two men, impatient expressions . . .

John rubbed his palm across his chin and up over his cheek. He needed a shave, but it was Sunday. Another Sunday with the sports shows and movies and tickle games with his son and sex games with Hilda. He looked for a cigarette and knocked the ashtray off the edge of the chair. He'd clean it later, or let Hilda take care of it tomorrow. It was late. Sirens sounded faraway as he changed the channel with the push-button selector (a chase scene—the same one he had seen before?—cut to Cagney grinning, a siren, a grin).

More sirens outside. Must be a fire, John thought. The television siren blended with the outside noise. A stereo effect. The volume increased for the commercial—the Doublemint twins danced across the screen, smiling and chewing. Back to the movie, and sirens droning outside.

If it was a fire, then it was probably somewhere around Chenago Street, in the black section near the hospital. Small town slums were growing, keeping pace with the cities. But not in the fifties movies, John thought, not on television; at least not right now. Cagney had a receded hairline. So did John, but that was a recent development. H ran his hand through his long blond hair, felt the bare spots that had once grown hair to grease and comb back on the sides.

Key clicking in the lock, screen door slamming, a child's whine, and, "Hello, we're home." Hilda turned on the lights and Doug, his face still smeared with chocolate, climbed into his lap.

"Why do you have it so dark in here?" she asked. "It's not good for your eyes. Did the Weinraubs call?" She sat down on the arm of the chair, not noticing the ashtray she kicked aside, and put her arm around John.

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Doug, ever jealous, tried to pull her arm away, but John let him play with his fingers.

It was earlier than he had thought; The television had distorted his sense of time. Nodding and conversing with Hilda, he tired to remember what he had done all day. He searched for subtle memories, patches of concrete experiances to prove he was alert and assuage the vague uncomfortableness.

You're tired, he told himself. Bad week, too many beers and cigarettes, not enough sleep. Hilda looked fine tonight; blond hair piled high on her head, rouged cheeks, nice shade of lipstick, no bra—that was her new fad. She was wearing a red pullover dress and gaudy gold earings that matched her fingernails. She would want sex tonight, John thought. Shit.

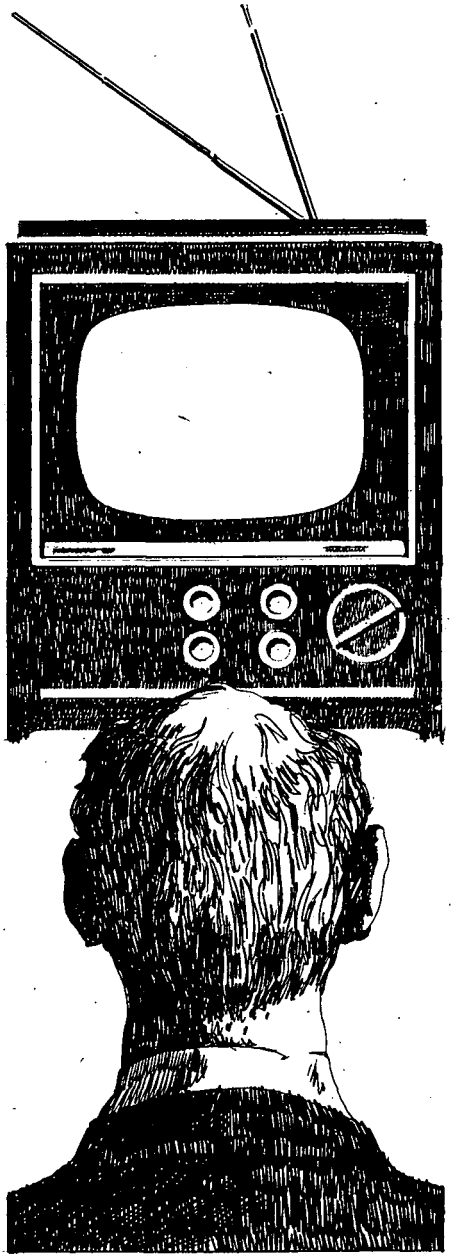
"Do you want to hear about the movie?" Hilda asked.

"I hated it," Doug said, slapping John's hand. Another commercial rang in—super offer, eight records and into a cathode clown running towards a glass dome followed by laughing and singing children, soon to stuff their imaginary faces with impossible milkshakes and double-decker-hamburgers with secret sauce.

John watched the commercial and listened to Hilda. She talked quickly, modulating her voice for effect, acting out the important scenes with her hands. And the commercial was reduced second, a pause for breath. Back to the movie.

"Then you *did* like the movie," John said, absentmindedly tickling Doug, who stoically refused to giggle and was content to play with any finger he could grasp.

"I didn't like all the violence. There was too much, and Doug started crying during that sex scene you said had been cut so they could change the rat-



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ing."

"Well, that's what Joe told me and Lorna told Joe."

"They'll be over to play cards tonight. Okay?"

"Yeah," John said, already regretting the rest of the night.

The movie ended by sliding into an auto commercial. Then there was a public service announcement delivered by a ghetto chieftan, a preview of next week's movie, and a quiz show that was losing its rating. John changed the channel, carefully disguising his interest in the new program. He nodded at all the appropriate times, squeezed her hand and rested his head against her arm for dramatic effect. But it was Cagney's face he saw superimposed on the screen—that same shot, white hair curled over his forehead, a few beads of sweat, waves on a dark beach, unseen men waiting. Another siren shocked him out of his thoughts, but this time it was only the television.

"There's quite a fire over on Susquahanna Street," Hilda said, shifting her position on the arm of the chair. She leaned against John and crossed her legs. "It's so bad that they're bringing in firetrucks from Central."

"You could even hear them in the movie," Doug said. "And everytime one went by, everybody started talking."

They watched the movie again, John and Hilda engrossed in the depths of realities only suggested. Soon they would have to surface and entertain and smile and later face each other for sex.

"I can hear the sirens. Can I go out to watch, just for a while?"

"No, young man," Hilda said. "You are going to get ready for bed right now." She leaned over to swat him, but he jumped off John's lap and curled up beside the chair. She leaned over again, but this time it was only an excuse to touch John's crotch, test it for a hard-on, order her dues with a Sunday night feel. It was too early—there could be no response yet.

"You heard me," she said. "Now get ready for bed."

John ignored her. Doug would go to bed, and even if he didn't—what the hell. But Hilda soon relented. They watched the movie and didn't hear Doug leave to watch another show in his bedroom.

"I'll have to prepare something before they get here."

"So go. And make sure Doug's in bed,"—he really didn't care, but he'd satisfy her—"because he's got school in the morning."

"No he doesn't," Hilda said. "It's a legal holiday. I forget which one, but the banks are closed too."

As she left for the kitchen, John heard the sirens again. He tried to remember if they were outside or on television.

Cagney was in the sand now, his game leg making his movements jerky, his large hands clinched into tight fists. In closer, with his face filling the top right corner of the screen, a worn face, a tired face with one eye slightly lower than the other, mouth a deep wrinkle in the blanket of his face, ears dirty, mouth dry, slightly hungry and uncomfortable, recently bleached white hair covering his forehead. The men waited. Hilda had not prepared any food. She sat at the foot of his chair, absently caressing his good leg. Doug was watching a different station and had his set on too loud. John tried to remember something he had to do tomorrow.

The doorbell rang.

There was a long moment while

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they both waited for Cagney to answer the door and then a cut to another commercial and they both got up at once to let the Weinraubs in.

The Weinraubs entered with easy, practiced efficiency. A couple familiar hugs, slaps on shoulders and the preliminaries were out of the way. The television was moved so that it could be seen from the card table and the game was under way.

After a while Hilda was winning. John should have been doing better, but the television was distracting him. Hilda had left it on for a possible news flash concerning the fire that was not yet under control. According to the last announcement, it was consuming its second building, a four story walk-up with a store front that hadn't been rented for the last six months.

The Weinraubs were quite at home in John's living room. Joe had been an old boyfriend of Hilda's when they were in college. He had spent most of his time on campus playing football, drinking beer and setting a school record for screwing coeds. John had only known him after Hilda broke it off, and for reasons unknown to any of them, they doggedly spent a few hours a week together. John could play the sportminded, machismo type—and sometimes he really enjoyed it—but it was a ruse and he knew it, remembering painfully that he had lost most of his high school fights and had very few friends. The youthful trauma of acne, with all the resultant scars, gave him a rugged look that made the machismo game come easier. Most of his friends and neighbors suspected that he really swung his cock around, but it was all facade. Hilda knew better, though she never admitted it or discussed it with him.

Joe Weinraub's wife was moderately pretty—long blond hair, probably straighetened, high cheekbones and large blue eyes, a long sloping nose over an asture mouth (colorless—fashionably without lipstick) and very large breasts. Always braless, she was obviously proud of them as she was always touching them and pouting.

"A full house," Lorna Weinraub said, tickling her breasts and scooping up chips from the middle of the green felt table. She organized them into little piles of like colors while Joe started to pick up the cards. They only played poker and blackjack; bridge and canasta required too much concentration—that caused bad tempers, and only a light evening would do.

"Dammit," Hilda said. "I have three aces." She spread the cards out neatly before her. Joe picked them up quickly and started shuffling. The light in the livingroom was dim, but no one complained. The softness that diffused the room was only partly a combination of low lights and pale yellow walls; the brandy and compulsory pot completed the psychological tableau of grim delight and transferred dislike.

"That's my girl," Joe said. Keep winning and *you* can pay the rent."

"More coffee anybody?" asked Hilda, pushing her chair back, standing up. "And don't anyone sneak a look at those cards." Everyone tried to laugh, but the television filled in for the embarrasing pause. It provided a continuous background conversation with its movies and commercials.

John stared at Lorna's breast, caught her eye, grinned, and straightened his cards. Casual flirting was allowed, in fact, was one of the

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rules. Hilda's tits are bigger, John thought. His eyes burned and he was getting a headache. They would leave in about an hour, he thought. Once the lights were turned off, Hilda taken care of and asleep, John could play memory games until he fell asleep.

He had a good hand this time—three kings for openers. Manipulating the cards in his hand, fanning them open, he concentrated, felt his face tighten. He could almost hear the tin foil rattling of a distant sea—the television murmured, playing to an empty chair.

"How's Doug?" Lorna asked.

"Fine," said John, but it was not his turn to speak.

"He went to the dentist today," Hilda said, bringing in a tray of cookies. "As a reward for only having one cavity, I took him to the movies, although I wish I hadn't."

"Only one cavity?" asked Joe.

"I wish I could say the same for mine," Lorna said. "Susan needs braces and is setting a record for decay. Dr. Moldbaum says she has a 'non-cleansing mouth'. Suggested she use a water pic. We bought her one and she dropped it in the toiler. Now it doesn't work."

"She has my teeth, poor kid," Joe said.

"Maybe it's your toothpaste," Hilda said, pouring coffee for Joe.

"But we use a floride."

The television filled in—a commercial, extra-loud, planned for just such a moment, black coffee, just brewed and served on a silver tray to vacant doll-like guests who smiled and sniffed to arouse sympathetic television smells.

Another round of cards, a pause to listen to another announcement about the fire—it was certainly out of control and emergency measures were in order. That would mean more sirens and more coverage. John could hear the sirens. They sounded as if they were near the house, but he knew they weren't. It was background noise; the television reporter—hair just fashionably long enough, natty suit with contrasting tie—was in the proper place: a fire to his right, incoming trucks and fire engines to his left, all equipped with sirens that screeched only for effect. They became only background noise for the off-color fire. John started to get up to adjust the color (the fire was too green), but sat back down because it was his turn to deal.

Another hand of cards, another pause for a commercial. It seemed the set was on too loud. It was an overly familiar movie, replayed too many times. They could almost say the dialog along with it—indeed, they often did. The skinny cardshark had greenish golden hair and tightly set lips; his opponent was heavy, for contrast, and had thick lips set between loose pockets of skin to magnify the illusion of soft-skinned decadence. The smells were musty—a blend of perspiration, coffee, perfume and tobacco.

The old man would win again. He'd always win; his face wore the strain of every game—he fed on success and tension. Each win was a meal hungrily sought after to be digested and stored in and around his face. Hanging jowls and fatty tissue preserved the past.

John ate pretzles and played cards, refusing Hilda's polite offers of beer and whiskey. He pretended that he couldn't drink during a game; it would muddle his thinking, and the odds had to be calculated continuously, with the play of every card.

Everyone was quiet. Only the

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clanking of the radiators and the shuffling of the tired spectators interrupted the hypnotic metronome beats of breathing. The cards sat unheeded in the middle of the table, surrounded by plastic chips of different colors. No sirens; the television was quiet, or playing out the same scene, winding down for the commercial.

"Again?" Joe asked.

"Well, that's that," said Hilda. "John, lower the TV; it's giving me a headache."

Lorna smiled at John, traded in her chips for quarters and dimes, rubbed her arm against her breast. "You can win it back next time."

How long had the commercial been on? John couldn't remember. Joe and Lorna stood up and waited for John to get their coats. He had lost again. But to Lorna, sweet, soft, almost—but not quite—flabby Lorna. The television *was* on too loud.

Walking towards the door, Joe seemed impatient to leave and John kept glancing towards the television. They smiled at each other when their eyes were forced to meet, both regreting the evening, both hoping to quickly make it a muddled memory—soon forgotten. It was a mutual understanding that this was how it was, and it would always be the same.

It had always been the same. Kiss Lorna, she squeezes a bit too tightly—perhaps they weren't kidding about an orgy. (That wasn't a movie; flashback to an Italian movie, medium shot of brown shinned girl in low-cut-dress riding a count or something, holding his tie for security.)

Joe smiled, adding a temporary crease to his smooth face, and said goodbye and see you at work—John quickly forgot as he watched their car back out of the driveway. Hilda waved goodbye and stood at the door, holding John's hand.

"I'm hungry," John said.

"Hungry? You've been snacking all night."

"Maybe I'll have some cereal."

"Let's go to bed," Hilda said, slipping the clasps from her hair and shaking her head. Her hair fell to her shoulders, unkempt and curly. "You can wait until morning."

"So can you."

Hilda laughed and watched television while John went into the kitchen. The kitchen was small, L shaped and modern. A formica top table fitted into the corner and one of the four wicker backed chairs was broken. Rising on his toes, John searched for the cereal.

"The news is on," Hilda said. "More about the fire. Two firemen had to be taken to University because of smoke inhalation. I don't know how many people are dead. Here, I'll turn it up."

"Don't wake Doug. I can't find the cereal, dammit."

"Here," said Hilda, "listen."

The television speaker reverberated, the announcer coughed, a few shouts, the confident voice of a woman who was in no danger, another announcer, sports, weather, and a breakfast commercial (*chocolate cereal is the best, 'cause it's made to give you zest—why didn't Hilda turn it off?*).

"Do you want to go see the fire for awhile?" Hilda asked, stepping into the kitchen, pressing herself against John who was still peeking into the cupboard. She tucked her hands under his belt, pushed them towards his crotch. "We could park the car a few blocks away and walk over."

It was warm in the house. John would check the thermometer as soon

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as Hilda gave up. Hilda always turned it up when company came. There was no cereal, tomorrow was another day.

"You used to get hard when I did this. Remember?"

Standing in front of the paneled cupboards—the veneer was coming unglued—John waited until she was finished. Either she'd make it or they would go to sleep. It was her turn to arouse him, say the right things. He was tired, had had a hard day at the office—mix up or something. He tried to remember what he'd done during the day, but could only remember the newscasts—certainly it was only fair that she should leave him alone. He'd played a good game of cards. It was too hot. What time was it?

"I need you."

"Yes," John said, clearing his throat.

"It's no use."

Well, John thought, go on.

"I need you right now."

He was a lawyer, that actor, or something like that. The roles merged in John's mind—actor and role, at one point they were the same thing. He couldn't remember the name of the movie; he didn't try. He was hard. He could turn on the stove and make it warmer. The announcer repeated his announcement, his voice a dull monotone. Sadness and horror were alright emotions, John thought. He was afraid he would lose the hard-on. He pictured himself lying on cushions, fingers playing and pressing into the deep, soft pile of the rug.

He leaned against the table while Hilda played with him, first with her fingers, then with her mouth; but it was a ruse—she wanted him on the bed, beating against her, strong and virile. It was too warm in the house. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

The announcer was saying something about the fire. He couldn't quite make it out, strained to hear, went slowly limp.

"It's no use,' she repeated.

"What was that about the fire?" John asked, zipping up his pants, heading back into the living room.

Hilda remained in the kitchen. John pulled a chair in front of the television and took off his shoes, Maybe he would take off his shirt, too—it was much too warm.

"I'm sorry, John," Hilda said from the kitchen.

John nodded silently in reply, waiting for her to come in the room and try again. Maybe it would work this time, sometimes it did. He tried to ignore the sirens and the announcer. He stifled a yawn and closed his eyes. Maybe he *could* get hard and play with her. He wanted to sleep.

"Don't take off your shoes," she said. "The Weinraubs are coming over for cards."

"But they were here last night."

"No, silly. We made the card party for tonight. Remember?"

Of course he remembered—the card party, the tin foil ocean. Somewhere the men were still waiting and there was a knock at the door.

Everyone was quiet. Only the clanking of the radiators and the shuffling of the tired spectators interupted the hypnotic metronome beats of breathing. The cards sat unheeded in the middle of the table, surrounded by plastic chips of different colors. No sirens; the television was quiet, or playing out the same scene, winding down for the commercial.

John tried to remember to check the thermostat, but it was his turn to deal.

—Jack C. Haldeman II & Jack Dann

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THE DAY I LOST IT

Kendall Evans' previous appearance here was "Metamorphosis" (May, 1974). Now he returns with a tale about a Secret Agent whose life hovers between fantasy and reality . . .

KENDALL EVANS

I AM MATCHLESS.

On this overcast London street, standing near a pub's entrance and pawing at my shirt pocket, I am without matches for my cigarette. It dangles, doubled in vision's oval window where my mind feels naked to the universe, trapped in the gentle press of my lips. And my gold lighter with engraved initials like so:

R
O
D

is useless in my pocket, the flint reduced to a powder of scattered filings. The lack of flint in the lighter, my lack of matches, are annoying suggestions that I might be slightly incompetent.

So I remind myself I should purchase some flints, because I like the lighter. I like the double suggestiveness of the engraved letters: their sexual tilt, the ambiguous acronym of the letters lacking periods.

The dangling cigarette makes me vaguely nervous. Removing it from my lips I effectively reduce the tension.

And notice a young blue-mini-skirted blonde girl pushing a baby carriage. A short distance past me she halts, bending over the handle of the carriage to adjust the infant's covers, and as a result her mini-skirt hikes upward to reveal the sheen of blue silk panties stretched taut over the smooth mounds of her buttocks. Staring appreciatively stirs me slightly, and when she straightens my eyes shift downward a notch to linger on the firm flesh of her legs.

My mind makes the transition to an old man approaching, tapping his cane regularly. The percussive sound of the taps merges with notes that spark here and there in the traffic—the honk of horn, the thrum of wheels—and an indisputable order is formed. This peripheral manifestation of my theme song lifts my spirits, makes me feel that this day will be a good one.

I look to the traffic stream, where cars of a generally more conservative color than those in America blur past, and the sounds continue weaving themselves together. My theme builds, its tempo speeding up, its volume increasing.

The melody is more blatant now, its presence definite; and on the surge of sound I swell until I feel epical, immense in a vivid milieu.

And though it recedes a moment later, I am left with a nucleus of good feelings. I step toward the half-timbered facade of the pub, kick gently with the toe of my boot at an ash-gray beam set diagonally in white

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plaster. My orders require me to enter the pub at 11:00 exactly, and as usual I have arrived early. So though I probably should not be doing this, I am waiting right outside the Boar's Tusk. Since it would go contrary to my orders, I cannot step into the pub for a light.

Unlit cigarette in hand, I return to the ash beam, giving it a second touch with boot tip.

THE TRIP over from America was uneventful, excepting the rainbow and the shadow. I had taken these, at first, for a negative sign.

Weary of reading the material tucked into the kangaroo pouch stitched to the back of the seat directly before me, I decided to study cloud formations. For this was all that could be seen through the tiny window at my side: beneath a blue vacancy of sky, a landscape of clouds. They stretched as far as the horizon without interruption. The panorama resembled a snow-blanketed terrain, a land of cotton. The surface was featured with whorls, cloud mountains, imitation vallyes. Above the kingdom of clouds, up nearer the plane, were small puffs of white, disconnected, resembling negative images of black flak.

It was then that I noticed the rainbow. Not your ordinary rainbow; this one was circular, target shaped, a series of concentric bands of color: red, yellow-green, blue, violet. In toward the center the colors were fairly distinct, but outward they became increasingly translucent. I was fascinated, I had never before seen, never heard about or read about a target-shaped rainbow, and I kept staring at it. I called it to the attention of the passenger beside me, who was interested, but only slightly. Apparently mysteries didn't intrigue him. But then I'm a secret agent, so I'm automatically intrigued by mysteries. Or at least if you read the brochures on my profession, you'll find they say this is the case.

It took me only a moment to realize that the rainbow was traveling with us, moving as the moon moves following one through the trees of a forest, and not fixed like a projected image on the clouds.

And then, within the bands of color, deep at the very center, I noticed the shadow. It seemed appropriate, a dark center for a target: the bull's-eye. But the shadow, the darkness, was not a circle; rather, it was irregular.

The plane was descending to a lower flight path; the cloud terrain tilted, seemed to move upward toward the plane. The rainbow expanded; as did the shadow, until it became recognizable. It was the shadow of the airplane, a guppy-shaped silhouette of the 747 jetliner. As I mentioned, for an instant I took it as a bad sign: the plane I was aboard at the center of a target. As if it were about to be destroyed. And I began to doubt the efficacy of my new assignment.

But an agent doesn't need fears as he begins an assignment, so I brought forth my powers of logic to banish the demons. Logic said: all rainbows may very well be circular. After all, I thought, they do seem to form an arc of a circle, and they may continue invisible beneath the earth, or rather would continue if the earth did not intervene. Logic also suggested that this might be a perfectly ordinary phenomenon which I was observing. Airplanes might cast rainbow-circumscribed shadows on nearly every flight when atmospheric condi-

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tions were right. Of course I wondered, still, why I had not heard of this before.

But I thought of the wind keening on the wings, and listened to the scattered sounds of the passengers, and notes and chords of my theme soon soothed me.

COMPLETING A CIRCLE on the sidewalk, I approach the ash beam, tapping it again.

And glance at my watch, its dial a calibrated circle with three silver hands.

AFTER MY ARRIVAL I took the underground to Paddington Station and obtained a room at the Cecil Court Hotel in Sussex Gardens. Located near Hyde Park, the hotel was a virtual pension, a bed-and-breakfast place that I liked because the owner served Canadian Bacon with the breakfast. The key to my room proved a minor inconvenience because it was attached to a key-chain whose ornament was a large flat trapezoid of blue plastic that bulged in my pocket. On one side of the ornament was the name and address of the hotel, but on the opposite side was a white design that I liked. When I first saw it I thought it to be a fleur-de-lis. Actually, it consisted of a crowned lion reared on hind legs and facing front, surrounded by two reared unicorns in profile, facing the lion and wearing crowns as collars. I believed the design would be a good one for a talisman; its symmetry gave me a sense of order, of things being under control.

MY CONTACT APPEARS, interrupting these thoughts. I have never seen the man before, but I recognize his piebald fedora, which obtrudes glaringly in a nation of black bowlers. A telephone call earlier this morning mentioned the hat and little else. He sees me lingering at the pub's entrance. He doesn't know me but recognizes me for what I am: one of us. Or maybe he thinks I'm one of them. In any case, my presence—which can be overwhelming—brings him up short. He is about to continue into the Boar's Tusk but I stop him. Grinning, I bum a match from him. He frowns; without speaking he lights my cigarette and then walks on, into the pub.

Lingering outside I return to the ash colored beam, give it another tap, notice that I am doing so, realize that I have been doing so repeatedly for the past twenty minutes. And suddenly know this tends to be a habit of mine when I am standing waiting somewhere, to walk from some specific point or object and then return to it, making contact with it each time, as if I am returning to a point of security. The behavior worries me because it strikes me as being slightly compulsive.

Checking my watch I note that it is 11:00 exactly. Entering the pub I pass beneath the suspended sign which, labeled MAGNET ALES, bears a picture of an immense horseshoe magnet. Inside, the pub is a dingy place. Above the bar the ceiling lowers and on the resulting verticle surface are a series of framed photographs, poor quality and with a slight pink tint, of nude women, their armpits and pubes shaven bald. Maybe this way they are not supposed to be obscene, I decide; perhaps there is some local law or ordinance which prohibits revealing pubic hair. But the result is ugly, it repels me, making me feel that there is a sickness pervading here. A cluster of people at the bar speak with thick accents and demonstrate none of the traditional British reserve. Looking

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around, I conclude that this place isn't exactly the crotch of luxury. But then, secret agents don't actually always move in such expensive and exclusive circles. Don't believe the brochures on that point. An agent's expense account is strictly budgeted.

I spot the piebald fedora and walk toward the table, sitting down across from my fellow operative.

"Hello, Joseph," I say, using the name I was instructed to employ. "I see you've ordered my usual bottle of Bass's Ale." The entire sentence is coded; it verifies my identity. But of course an actual bottle of Bass & Co's Pale Ale is on the table; I recognize the blue triangle on the oval lable.

"Hi, Michael," he says. My name is not Michael. "How are Betty and the kids?" There is no Betty, there are no children.

"Oh, Betty's fine," I say, tilting the mug and pouring the ale into it. When the mug is nearly full, topped by a narrow white disk of head, about a quarter of the bottle remains. "Denise just graduated from high school. And Bruce is captain of his little league team. My God, you should see Denise; she's starting to look like a real lady. Developing, you know."

I crush my cigarette out in a dirty tin ash tray the color of tarnished pewter, and ask Joseph for his matches; he passes them across the table. After lighting my cigarette and sipping at the ale, I ask him about his wife.

"Louise is well," he informs me. His expression remains laconic.

We continue talking, engaging in paltry conversation. Our words are meaningless; we speak of trivialities, fabricated families, lies and lives made up in the convoluted hallways of the Central Intelligence Agency's devious collective intellect.

And the agent who composed my lines didn't do his homework. Or at least, I assume he neglected to check my dossier; either that, or he indulged in a pointless practical joke. In any case, I am forced to drink Bass's Ale when I would prefer a good cold glass of light Heineken.

Reaching out, I tick my cigarette against the rim of the ash tray, knocking loose a nipple of ash.

The repetitive aspect of smoking occurs to me, the way my arm reaches out time and again to tap cigarette against ash tray, and I am obscurely reminded of my behavior outside the pub, when I continually approached and made contact with the ash-colored beam. It strikes me that such repetitive actions have a ritualistic quality about them. And looking to the ash tray, it appears to me to be a kind of offering dish, its contents ashen remnants of a sacrifice.

"Well, Joe," I say, noticing that I have nearly finished the ale; "I guess I'd better be leaving."

"Oh, wait a second," he says. "I was going to ask you: have you seen today's copy of the Daily Mail?"

"No. No, I haven't. Why?"

"It's got some interesting news in it. I thought you might want to read it." He hands the newspaper, which has been resting on the seat beside him all this while, across the table.

Standing to leave, I tuck the newspaper under one arm and swig a last long draught of ale standing. "Goodby, Joseph," I say, and crush my cigarette out in the bottom of the ash tray. The two whitish butts, strewn with ashes, resemble small charred fragments of bone.

Outside it has been showering, although the sun shines through a ragged gap in the clouds. There are continent-shaped puddles on the walk. A red, double-decker bus rushes past, spewing an invisible

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stream of noxious exhaust. I glance between the folded pages of the newspaper, and sure enough inside are foreign sheets: my top-secret orders.

Somewhere, just at the edge of things, my theme is building. Snatches of it flirt in the traffic. Instantly my mind sharpens to a more alert state. I notice the sleek black Daimler sliding up on my right; from the corner of my eye I catch an image of four men inside. Sunlight glances gently off the snout, long and smooth, of the rifle held by the man opposite the driver.

My theme crescendos, complete with staccato rhythms, frenzied tempo. Danger and possibility depend from the cloud speckled sky. I take several quick steps forward; the long strides feel just exactly right. Every move I make now is easy, controlled. Gracefully I dive forward. . . .

But my impact with the pavement is harsher than expected. Something snaps in my pocket, I realize it is breaking plastic, blue plastic, and picture in my mind fleur-de-lis symmetry shattering.

Something is wrong, most definitely wrong. Bullets crack around me on the sidewalk, causing splinters of concrete to sting my face, and I squirm forward, toward the shelter of a parked car. My theme seems to fall short of its peak, to jangle with ominous discords, out-of-time, off-key, and as my .38 special slides from its holster and into my hand, I am left dangling in silence. My theme is absent, nowhere to be heard.

The rainbow fills my mind, I picture my own silhouette at the center of the target, the calibrations in the sight of my enemy's weapon perhaps mesh with the bands of color. I suffer an acute urge to drop the revolver and curl fetally, my theme song is gone and what can I do now that I've lost it?

The Daimler squeals to a halt, skewing into the adjacent lane. Sunlight opaques its windshield. Crouching behind a parked Rolls, peering around a fender, I feel knotted, my body wants to be immobile but I fight this desire. The loss of my theme gives me a most mortal feeling, an undertow of fallibility, weakness, cowardice, which are for the most part outside my experience. But I fight upward into the drone and spatter of bullets, the ricocheting particles whining, the buzzing and blossoming confusion, and fire upon the men spilling from the open doors of the Daimler, a repetition of bullets.

I feel pain stitch across my arm, and realize I am hit. I fire again and again, watching as two of them collapse. My side is being eaten out is all bloody and numb but I am holding on to consciousness or trying to my ears my eyes the sirens spinning-flashing lights. . . .

I HAVE RENTED this cheap flat with its view of an ugly industrial section of London, and I sit in this room and I smoke many cigarettes, many too many. I was in the hospital for a while but recovered, more or less. For a time it was difficult to get up, to get dressed. I kept neglecting to shave. I have been listless this past few weeks, as limp as a dead albatross.

But I think I'm getting better. I'm going out more often now. I may even take another assignment soon.

I'm hoping my theme will return . . . but in the meantime, and even if it doesn't, I do the only thing I can do.

I muddle through.

—KENDALL EVANS

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fantasy books

A MIDSUMMER TEMPEST, by Poul Anderson, Doubleday, 1974, $5.95, 207 pages (425 words per)

Poul Anderson is *not* one of those science-fiction writers whose settings almost always seem to be a plastic construct following the best rules of modern industrial design (various super-Manhattans, usually—see Harlan Ellison and Robert Silverberg). Here he depicts the weather and countryside of Seventeenth-Century England with a robustious loving care comparable to Chaucer's or P. G. Wodehouse's. Sample: "I recall how I, a youth first visiting this isle, when steeple-chasing, wished that I might fall and break my neck, to leave these bones in England. Yon English wheatfield, stalks as slim as she, sun-ripened, goes in ripples like her walk; its hue and heaviness bespeak her hair; the soul above it is no butterfly to flit and preen on jewel-broidered wings, but rather is, I think, a youthful hawk already riding lonely on the wind."

The speaker is our hero, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, defender of Charles I, he of the famous Drops and also Metal (a warlike and romantic prince, but also science-smitten and an artist, made to order for Anderson) while the not-unattainable she to whom he likens England's fields of wheat is the spirited and hoydenish Jennifer Alayne, ward of Sir Malachi Shelgrave, the nastiest and yet most plausible Roundhead ever to work out his sexual frustrations brainwashing witches or building an anachronistic railroad.

Yet this book also demonstrates how the wide, multi-disciplined and careful researching (history, geography, hard and soft sciences, witchcraft, the world of faery) characteristic of the best science-fiction writers can mightily aid in the construction of a dazzling science fantasy based on the idea of parallel, divergent and yet interconnected universes (including one where Shakespeare's plays are all true histories and the British Civil War takes a different tack)—one of the intersections being the taproom of the Old Phoenix tavern, where *anyone* may turn up, from Titania and Puck to D'Artagnan to Paraphysicist Valeria Matuchek (USA) to Clodia Pulcher, the Elizabeth Burton (or is it Jackie Onassis or even Simone de Beauvoir?) of young Caesar's Rome.

Finally, the book is almost a showcase of Anderson's command of words, bastioned by decades of hard study, experimenting, translating, and

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of writing many sorts of poetry: here be blank verse and other Shakespearean language, artfully placed rhymed couplets, a meticulously spelt South country drawl, shrewd touches of Dutch and Mediterranean speech, freewheeling modern lingo—is there anything this man can't do?

THE NOT-WORLD, by Thomas Burnett Swann, DAW, 1975, $1.25, 160 pages (325 words per)

Here is a somewhat similar and slenderer fantasy set in England (Bristol and the nearby forest of the title) about a century later. It too has the supernatural world of the old woods (Genii, Drusii, Night Mares, a witch) pitted against progress (a hydrogen balloon, for instance). Heroine and hero are a Gothic novelist (spinster of 30 with a limp) and a jolly (but also well-educated) tar; and there's her plump poetess aunt and also Thomas Chatterton, the boy genius who died at 17—or maybe didn't.

The wonder is that the story holds up so very well in comparison with Anderson's; in their way (more playful) the high points are as high. Anderson appears to have the more scientific, Swann the more purely literary education, but he is also a poet (the Robert Herrick sort of charming trifles) and (always most important!) a devoted lover of words. Take this (of a ruined church):

"Chapel looks safe, 'cept for them bird things on the roof."

"Gargoyles."

"Ghouls, you say? Perched on the house o'God like so many gulls!"

Or, of the interior:

The nave was large and cold and empty of pews, a forest of limestone whose animals peered through the eyes of its saints.

Or,

Owls in a forest chapel. They nested in ivy around her London house. They fluttered about the masts of ships on the Thames. They flew at genteel ladies, who flung up their hands to protect their hair and gracefully swooned in the arms of waiting gentlemen.

Occasionally Swann pushes this sort of thing almost too far toward artificiality:

They were weeping willows which, unlike their civilized sisters, bent away from the water, melancholy maidens fearful of wetting their skirts.

But mostly his touch and judgment are very sure:

The waters were sluggish and murky; they seemed to swallow the sunbeams like so many goldfish . . . Night Mares perhaps found the waters congenial for their duels and drownings.

Here truly, is a supernatural fantasy for Georgette Heyer fans and lovers of "children's books" like *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Three Mulla Mulgars*—completely non-pedantic yet scholarly and alive with literary and historical allusions and perky language. And a charming cover by George Barr. A delight.

XELUCHA, by M. P. Shiel, Arkham, 1975, $6.50, 244 pages (325 words per)

These are reputedly classic horror stories (Lovecraft praised 'em) told in some of the wildest melodramatic language going—essence or elixir of *fin de siècle*. Who but Shiel could (or would) ask such rhetorical questions as "Can a moon-beam, then, perish of suppurations? Can the rainbow be

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eaten by worms? Ha! Ha!" Who wouldn't be intrigued by that black, rayless chamber where "Lucy Hill stabbed to the heart Caccofogo, mistaking the scar on his back for the scar of Soriac," or receive such a communication as did the lady Rowena Howard of Iste: "A man costumed as a polar bear (Darnley's scretary) contrived to drop into her parasol a card which bore the words, 'May we meet? At the Meta Sudana,' " or by Xelucha herself ("Her nose underwent a green decay before burial"—as faithfully recorded by Utpatel on the dust jacket).

FROM EVIL'S PILLOW, by Basil Copper, Arkham House, 1973, $6.00, 177 pages (335 words per)

Modern British supernatural horror writers have a reputation for chasteness and restraint, but clearly a man who can discern an affinity between Charon's barge and Cleopatra's; create an infernal machine resembling "an early instrument of Galileo," base a tale on a painting of a sinister old man lugging a naked girl head downward so that "her long gold hair dragged through the wet grass," or end a novella with "the teeth, bones and hair of three young girls" cannot be entirely bloodless.

In particular "Amber Print" is a delight in its knowledgeable depiction of silent-film hobbyists and its rekindling of the romantic murky world of German Expressionist cinema, of Decla-Bioscop and UFA's Neubabelsberg Studios, of Conrad Veidt, Lya de Putti, Lil Dagover, and Gosta Ekmann, and especially of a lost print of *Caligari,* the last showing of which is managed with horrendous panache.

Don't be put off this book by Utpatel's dustjacket art, which mysteriously depicts three mincing drag queens posturing before Japan's newrisen sun. Underneath is the good, good Banta paper and binding that embodied Derleth's and his Arkham's integrity.

STORIES OF DARKNESS AND DREAD, by Joseph Payne Brennan, Arkham, 1973, $6.00, 174 pages (350 words per)

Here is good, competent second-generation *Weird Tales*—all of these stories would certainly have sold to that magazine, had it lasted into the 1960's. A touch heavy-handed, a bit lurid, but written with gusto. I do the reader no disservice if for example here I reveal that the seven winds of "City of the Seven Winds" are "the four winds of earth and the three winds of hell!" Another inexplicable drag-queen dust jacket, completely out of key with the stark events inside, this time by Denis Tiani.

DREAMS FROM R'LYEH, by Lin Carter, Arkham, 1975, $5.00, 72 pages

I can accept such lines as:

"Never let the worldly wise
Wipe the dream-dust from our eyes,"

"Sometimes I dream that I was once a man
On some small planet in the deeps of night."

I pause at:

"The world's a skull-full of stinking mould–
And I laugh at your little gods!"

"Canst save thee from the hunger-maddened wrath
Of the Begotten of Shub-Nigguarth."

"Jones gibbering and mad. Un-

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cle was dead.
They found his body. All except the head."

I almost come to a full stop at:

"My kingdom here is dust and bones,
But I rule on from newer thrones."

"And the sound of footsteps calling
Comes across the world to me."

But when it comes to,

"The nations kneel in fear before our step . . .
We are the children of Nyarlathotep."

"Dim vast Cykarnosh, I am no more sane,
For too much horror burns away the brain,"

then I can only express my feelings in the immortal lines of a forgotten poet,

"I am crazed with the spell of Arabia–
They have stolen my wits away."

As Lin Carter himself wrote to L. Sprague de Camp, who does the introduction, "They were written in a sense of fun, the shivery relish of Lovecraftian ghoulishness and Klarkash-Tonian hyperbole." One poem, "Shard," is very nice. A delightfully Cthulhu-cultish cover by Tim Kirk, best current Arkham artist (with Herb Arnold).

CITADELS OF MYSTERY, by L. Sprague and Catherine C. de Camp, Ballantine, 1973, $1.25, 292 pages (450 words per)

A beautifully satisfying book about all those "lost civilizations" that were the ultimate symbols of mystery to me when I was a child and some of them were just being discovered: Easter Island, the Mayans, the mountain fortress of Machu Piccu, et cetera—what they're like to visit today, the various crackpot (and more respectable) theories about them, the fantasy uses to which they've been put, together with notes, bibliography, and index, and appropriate quotes from Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, Lin Carter, Byron, Fitzgerald, Shelley and Tennyson.

FANTASY COLLECTOR'S ANNUAL 1974; same 1975 and THE FIRE-FIEND AND THE RAVEN, edited and published by Gerry de la Ree, Saddle River, N.J., 07458

Three fine 8 1/2 x 11" softcovers of black-and-white fantasy illustrations; facsimile, typed and printed letters of fantasy writers and artists, photographs, signatures of such as George Sterling and Edgar Rice Burroughs, that sort of thing. Outstanding in the first are the deliciously sexy line drawings of Mahlon Blaine from the collection of Dunninger, the mentalist (and two fine Papés and some Blackwood and Lovecraft letters and the dust jacket of *The Outsider*); in the second: Wegeulin's illustrations of *Montezuma's Daughter*, some fine Finlays and letters the artist got from Seabury Quinn (and much more); the last enshrines the failure of one C. D. Gardette to counterfeit Poe with lines such as:

"Spat a ceaseless, seething, hissing, bubbling stream of gore!"

THE BRADBURY COMPANION, by William F. Nolan, Gale Research, 1975, $28.50, 339 pages (400 words per quarto p.)

Here is the definitive scrapbook

(Cont. on page 129)

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Letters intended for publication should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of each sheet, and addressed to According to You, *Box 409, Falls Church, Va., 22046*

Dear Ted,

Having received the December 1975 issue of FANTASTIC, I would like to make come comments on Fritz Leiber's review of Weinberg's and my *Reader's Guide to the Cthulhu Mythos.*

The omissions that Fritz noted in his review were given to me when I met Fritz last year, and will be included in the errata and addenda that I hope to publish, and the eventual third edition of the *Reader's Guide.*

Fritz stated, "One questions the need to include *all* of Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, apparently on the grounds that a couple of Sprague de Camp's posthumous ones contain Mythos references." It was decided that if the *Reader's Guide* was going to fulfil its function to the reader, and the writer as well, stories included as being Cthulhu Mythos that were part of a series should also be grouped with the entire series, since the non-Mythos stories give additional background on elements and characters in the Mythos stories. This, subsequently, facilitated the reader in locating these non-Mythos stories without having to resort to another bibliography.

Fritz further stated, "Or the wisdom of including scores of unpublished and merely projected Cthulhu tales. But even such works of supererogation demonstrate the enduring fascination of Lovecraft's bizarre creation." Since a bibliography usually goes out of date quite rapidly, unless there is a built-in cut-off date, and I was contacting everyone mentioned within, it was decided to include the titles of stories not yet published and those that were in progress. Of the 104 unpublished titles, 41 have been published or had their titles changed. Of the 95 titles of in progress stories, 26 have been published, are unpublished at this writing, or the titles have been changed. Since the manuscript was sent to the publisher in 1974, there have been 72 further Cthulhu Mythos or related stories published in amateur or professional magazines, or in book form.

Of interest on the same subject, to the readership of FANTASTIC, is the fact that DAW Books, Inc. will be publishing my original anthology, *The Disciples of Cthulhu*, next year. As well as the 19,000-word "The Terror from the Depths" by Fritz Leiber—a collaboration between Fritz Leiber 1937 and Fritz Leiber 1975—and a guest introduction by Robert Bloch, there are stories by Brian Lumley, James Wade, Bob Van Laerhoven, Ramsey Campbell, Walter C. DeBill Jr., Joseph Payne Brennan, Lin Carter, and Eddy C. Bertin. A total of nine stories for 110,000 words, never

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published before now.

EDWARD P. BERGLUND
SSgt Edward P. Berglund, 472-46-7335
8th ITT HqCo HqBn 2dMarDiv FMF
Camp Lejeune, North Carolina 28542

TW—

The mention of Clark Ashton Smith's death as having occurred in 1957 (he actually expired in 1961), in the introduction to the Smith/Carter collaboration in the October FANTASTIC, was a typo, right?

Your inclusion of this piece seems to constitute a rather direct contradiction to a certain publishing policy you mentioned in reply to Alan L. Bostick's letter in the June FANTASTIC; i.e. you seemed to imply (to, at least, *me*) that you are against publishing any new Cthulhu Mythos stories. Yet, as one even slightly steeped in the pseudo-lore of the Mythos can easily divine, "The Scroll of Morloc" is obviously & inarguably a Mythos tale; at least in the "Clark Ashton Smith branch" of the Mythos. (Concievably, well-nigh every writer who has contributed to this esoteric sub-genre could be awarded his own "branch" of gods, place-names, etc.)

The various mentions of the Voormis, the Serpent-people (of Valusia, creations of Robert E. Howard), the daemon-deity Tsathoggua, N'kai (invented by HPL in "The Whispererin Darkness"), the Gnophkeh (again, invented by HPL), & *especially* the ever-present Old Ones (pg 32, line 25) concretely confirm this.

Does this mean that you've rethought your seeming prejudice toward Mythos tales? Or are you willing to overlook apparent principles in regard to publishing "name" authors?

DANIEL BAILEY
PO Box 214
Stamps, Arkansas 71860

I don't have Lin Carter's letter on hand now to check it, but the error in dates was either Lin's or mine (in copying); my apologies for the error and thanks for your correction. As for Mythos stories, my comment to Bostick did not rule out the publication of new Mythos stories; it simply explained why, at that time, we had not published any. I am certainly not going to rule arbitrarily against publishing such stories–without having read them! And obviously I did not. My one guiding "principle" is to publish stories I feel deserve publication, and I've yet to "overlook" that one.– TW

TW—

Oh, how right Fritz Leiber was in *Fantasy Books* with his views on August Derleth's manhandling of the Cthulhu Mythos. Derleth started the Mythos down the hill, so to speak, by putting everything into nice neat cubicles; i.e. making all the Old Ones some sort of silly-damned elementals. Sounds more like the *Fantastic Four* than cosmic dread.

Of course, while Derleth *started* the Mythos down, Brian Lumley is increasing the rate of descent. He has taken all of those handy-dandy elementals & put the poor things in scientific laboratories, where they must be lonely indeed. At the rate Lumley's travelling, I shouldn't be surprised to see Yog-Sothoth guest in *Perry Rhodan* some day soon.

The sad thing is that the writers who do try to treat the Mythos with literary respect are locked away in the rarely-opened vaults of fanzines, unable even to attempt commercial success.

Oh, yes. Since I'm in the mood for picking nits, I'll observe that in his column Leiber observed that in Derleth's version of the Mythos "nightgaunts from *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* carry high-minded

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heroes who have sipped the golden mead . . . from Arkham . . . to London." What shall we do with Leiber? He *knows* it was the *Byakhee* who thus made like 747s.

DANIEL BAILEY
PO Box 214
Stamps, Arkansas 71860

Dear Ted,

The Big 24th Anniversary Issue was definitely a mixed bag of stories which varied from literary standards successfully. Avram Davidson achieved some distinction once again with his baroque use of words. His calculated misspellings and incorrect word usage made the sense of being in a parallel type of reality much more cogent. Also, his complicated descriptions of peculiar mannerisms and characteristic poses of various people in his universe made the story even more unique and freshly original. Even the digressions aided in the flow of the story in the tangential connections disparate parts of his narrative had with other parts. I believe Mr. Davidson is a very clever fellow. This story reassures me that is a correct assessment.

The Lin Carter tale was not so good as Davidson's, but was held together by Carter's strange sense of the barbaric. These savages of Carter's exist in a world richly described in a way outside their own ability to understand. Carter's depictions sound like idealized Middle English countrysides or fantastic places which could never be but are outlined in a clearly picturebook way. His rough and ready Thongor just doesn't fit the prose he uses to pretty the rest of the story. Also, if I remember correctly, he was one of two authors who used the color yellow to describe the hated eyes of the deadly menace. The color yellow just doesn't fit that kind of special danger. Instead, the use of the color makes the danger seem sick and fevered.

Effinger was being a bit too cute for my taste when he tried to use the old switch-on-the-switch and snapper ending in his Greek story. I like the way he made light of the Socratic dialogue technique. The philosophic plight was archly displayed in its most culturally influenced dimensions. I forgive Effinger the use of his outdated plot device, which at least for me, telegraphed the eventual ramifications of the story well before its end. Also, the minor character Stabo of Herra was very successful in his apostasy from the paths of pure philosophy. He added a lot of realism and at the same time droll humor to the tale.

Vsevolod Ivanov's modernday postscript on the myth of Sisyphus lost a lot in translation. I'm sure the words were a lot more fluent and much less awkward in the native tongue. The story itself lacked a compelling urgency of any sort. It didn't amuse me, or make me excited, etc. It was technically correct as far as the translation allowed one to tell, but not inspired.

The short stories were also ranged from very good to mediocre. Rick Stooker's "The Pi-A-Saw Bird" was the most successful from my viewpoint. He had a fresh perspective from which to write. His story, based on the Indian myth, was different in its emphasis from many other stories! In fact, it was one of the most highly original suggestions I've seen in your magazine. It works even better because he uses the emotions of guilt and love in a good way, a way which isn't slickly commercial or designed to evoke conventional responses. Unfortunately, the other shorts were less effective. Malzberg and Bunch both gave you average stories which seemed all too familiar from the particular biases of these writers. They

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like to harp on the same themes over and over without realizing the monotonous effect of the outcome. The others were undistinguished. I would comment that "Pandora's Cryogenic Box" was funny in spots but mostly just overdone. I'm glad such a thin variation on an idea was so mercifully short.

Though it may seem I'm being harshly critical in some places I don't intend my thoughts to be harmful. I just want to see more good quality fiction which you've proven that you're very capable of finding. However, I'd rather not have the extra stories in an issue if they are just filler which border on literary slum standards. It makes the rest of your magazine, which is eminently successful in its way, seem less excellent in comparison.

DAVE HULVEY
Rt. 7, Box 68
Harrisonburg, Va. 22801

Dear Ted:

I rarely write any letters at all, and I have never written to your magazines; partly because I am one of the world's foremost procrastinaters, and partly because of the fear that my opinion might be totally opposite of everyone else's. I enjoy reading the letter column, though, and I've always been determined to participate in it at least once. To avoid my usual delays, I'm getting this right off, only a few hours after buying a copy of the December FANTASTIC. Up to this point I have read only the short stories(saving the longer stuff for later) and this is in response to one of them in particular. All I can give is my personal opinion; how much it's worth is for others to decide.

From a reader's standpoint, I consider Colin Saxton's "The Flyer" one of the finest fantasy short stories of the year. The plot is simple and not terribly unusual for the field. What is exceptional is the writing, particularly the descriptive paragraphs. True, the people of the village and the exact nature of the whole scene are rather vague, but Mr. Saxton meant it that way. It's what I like to call "exact vagueness"—using vague illusions for the large scene to magnify (and add an eerie quality to) the immediate area of conflict: namely, the granite cliff. In unskilled hands this kind of writing can flop; here it was used beautifully to create a strangly haunting tale.

Indeed, the cliff jumps to life from the pages. The reader with the slightest imagination can picture vividly the Flyer pushing himself off the cliff face and soaring over the plain with the thermals. All through the story my mind's eye could clearly see everything happening; and it held me spellbound from start to finish. (I find it hard to imagine what fantastic geologic upheaval could cause such rushing flood as came near the end, but that doesn't matter.)

Perhpas I am over-praising the story, but from a writer's standpoint, I think I can imagine how hard it was to do. (I'm *sort* of a writer—I've submitted a few stories, one to this magazine; and I've written some poetry—none of it worthy of publication, I'm afraid.) I have tried to write stories along similar lines and failed. I've read a few printed stories using the same method which I considered substandard, too, but I'm not going to say by whom, since I'm enough of an idiot myself without blaming someone else for the same mistake.

I believe Mr. Saxton is a talented writer (and a good artist, too!) who deserves credit for his ingenuity. The magazine that printed such a fine story deserves credit too, since good writing isn't easy to find. And there is a mathod in my medness; if you pub-

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lish this letter (or even if you don't) perhaps I might be seeing more of this quality of writing (or at least more of Mr. Saxton) in the future.

As for the other stories—Bunch and Malzberg were their usual lovable selves, "Pandora's Cryogenic Box" was okay, "The Pi-A-Saw Bird" was very good, and "The Purvess Incident" was good ludicrous fun. Keep up the good work, please!

KELLY SHEW
16404 120th Av. S.E.
Renton, Wash. 98055

Dear Mr. White,

Something has been bothering me for years and I would like to tell you about it. So here goes:

I cannot see the point of what is called "mainstream fiction." Satire, polemics, yes; but the typical message novel, no. Why should you read a book about everyday creatures? It's exactly that: you see them and work with them each day. By the very act of picking up a novel, you are declaring that you are fed up with the real world and want to enter one of fantasy. But the standard fiction fare just forcefeeds more of the typical events of the life from which you are trying to escape! Also, at the end, the average "mainstream" novel deposits you at either one or the other of two very humdrum destinations: marriage or death. Why do people want to go through all the trouble of reading one of these creations, only to be sent back at the conclusion to the daylight world, like naughty kids?

But the twilight world of mythology and fantasy is free. The author makes up his own rules; there are usually strange, beautiful descriptions along the way, and an imaginative end. Consider also that fantasy is much older and more prevalent than "realistic" writing. Why, the oldest known literary work in the world, *Gilgamesh*, is pure heroica a la Robert E. Howard! Take all the Arthurian romances, the Robin Hood ballads, the tale of Roland, the Lay of the Nibelungs, and the rich epics of the ancient world—all freewritten mythologizing! If they use death or mating as finales, they are not the dull, "And they lived happily ever after," or "here lies."

A toast! To the decline and fall of petty, stupid, upstart "mainstream" literature!

ANTHONY SANDOR
(No address on letter)

The purpose of "mainstream" fiction is to create a vicarious experience for the reader. You were never in World War II? You can read one of the better war novels–from From Here To Eternity *to* Catch 22. *You've never travelled to Russia or lived in the last century?* War and Peace *will take you there. Etc. Through reading we enrich and broaden our "experience" and understanding of situations and places to which we've never been. Naturally works of fiction cannot prove points or demonstrate true reality, but as metaphors they tell us much–about ourselves and about others. Fantastic fiction goes beyond the vicarious experience of the "real" to vicarious experience of the "unreal"–a metaphor for matters of the spirit and the imagination: myth. I don't really see competition between these two types of fiction; they complement each other. In any event, one is free to choose what one wants to read and as long as each is in plentiful supply, no one should go unsatisfied.*–TW

Dear Ted:

Your August editorial had some insights that go beyond a literary evaluation of the Gor series.

You demonstrated even to a liberal-oriented person like myself that there is indeed a corrupting in-

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fluence in pornography. What is corrupting is not so much incitements to sexual misconduct but the false and narrow stereotypes, which degrade women and as a result degrade men.

As a result they degrade sex and any human relationship that can exist between women and men.

And through necessity they degrade an individual's view of life and "the human condition."

How far is the attitude currently referred to as "sexism" related to society's views on force and violence, the suppression of sensitivity and as one Victorian put it, "the meanest having power over the highest?"

One would like to think that this is what fantasy writers might in their small way be able to alter through broadening the resources of the imagination and of the spirit.

On another topic related to fantasy, I wonder if your magazine would be interested in featuring the old-fashioned American "tall tale," the humorous stories told about folk heroes like Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan, which represent the first form of American literature and which have been so well adapted by great writers from Washington Irving and Mark Twain up to Steven Vincent Benet.

Caught up just before our Bicentennial and just after our Watergate, Americans are more concerned than ever before with trying to make out just what we are.

By going to the roots of our past the tall tale has the power to affirm our traditions where they need to be affirmed while its humorous quality gives it the satiric capacity of mocking our traditions where they need to be mocked.

There is a mildly self-interested reason for this question. I wrote a query letter concerning a story I wrote and have not yet received a reply.

So the question remains . . . Does FANTASTIC accept tall tales?

RONALD SEIGEL
Post Office Box 03015
Highland Park, Michigan 48203

I'm afraid you're right about the demeaning qualities of pornography—I agree with you despite my own belief that the First Amendment covers the right to publish pornography. The problem is two-fold: 1) most pornography is trash—badly-written material by writers of little talent other than that needed to type reams of somewhat-readable material on a regular schedule; and 2) in concentrating upon sexual acts and their divorce from either emotional realities or realistic consequences, most pornography is anti-humanistic and possibly "corrupting". These are not built-in limitations of the form so much as they are reflections of publishing realities and the prevailing attitudes in our culture toward sexual realism in the arts. That is, until very recently (the past ten years), we were loathe to admit sexuality had any place in either the arts or our own lives—sex was something we hushed up and felt embarrassed about. Now that we're talking about it more openly, we are still doing so out of feelings of perhaps unconscious embarrassment: we must demean it (and ourselves) in order to bring it out into the open; we are still afraid to confront the reality *of sexuality. Instead we have created a new fantasy around sex: trashy pornography. Since most pornography is offensive on an esthetic level (that is, it is badly written, crudely conceived, and definitely sexist) it* confirms *our residual feelings that sex is somehow disgusting in and of itself. It is to be hoped that we can eventually transcend this Victorian heritage. As for tall tales, to move on to your second topic, we've published them in the*

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past and will publish them in the future whenever we find such stories we like. They are definitely part of the total spectrum of fantasy.—TW

Dear Ted,

Boas' Frazetta imitation (October *Fantastic*) almost appraoches the Grand Master's in design. . . .your cover artist may yet earn his diploma at the Frazetta School of Fine Art. However, the realization constantly gnaws that if this artist had *real* talent, *real* imagination, he would not resort to imitations; he would do Original Boases. . . .I believe he may indeed have this capability.

Speaking of artists, I am continually stunned by Olsen's work; this man doesn't draw pictures, he photographs them—from the darkest core of the human Psyche. His uncanny skill makes my pulse literally pound with questions: "What is Happening?" "How Does He Manage This?" "Where is the Source of These Ideas?" Richard Olsen pulls the still-viewer deeper than the two dimensions of page-print. He excites you. He—well, you can see I think he's damn good. How about an Olsen cover sometime in the near future? I think he's come of age.

Fandom: AMAZING's major attraction is its fan-oriented structure—therefore, *The Clubhouse* is a vital feature there. Expand it. Bestow bimonthly status to Susan Wood. In this American era of Cold War with Thy Neighbor, readers *need* something to cling to—solidarity, support, groupsharing—and, no matter how inadequately, fandom provides that. Fandom, as one BNF tritely put it, "is a gathering of friends." Alienated youth need such a common interest-ground.

Reporting Policy: The 25¢ reading fee is not objectionable. What bothers me is the unholy "holding time" AMAZING and FANTASTIC give to manuscripts submitted. I sympathize with Slush Pile Lethargy felt by editor and First Readers, but—dammnit—3 or 4 months is a hell of a long time to await an Editorial Reply. Couldn't this time-span be shortened somewhat? Author's simultaneous submissions are unnecessarily tempted by the present policy (A & F are not solely to blame, *Galaxy* and *F & SF* are also frequently late repliers). I'd appreciate hearing your explanation as to why the above situation exists. Does AMAZING and FANTASTIC accept simultaneous submissions? In light of the reporting policy, I think that they should.

JOHN DI PRETE
45 Vale Avenue
Cranston, R.I. 02910

Theoretically The Clubhouse *is on a bimonthly schedule. Unfortunately, it has occasionally been pushed out of an issue due to circumstances beyond my control; the recent (and still continuing, as I write this) Canadian postal strike hasn't helped; Ms. Wood lives in Canada. I feel the letters column in both magazines also serve the same functions of reader-involvement in the stf community. "Three or four months" is a long time to wait for a reply on a submission, and I sympathize with anyone who finds himself stuck with such a wait; I believe the majority of submissions are now being dealt with on a much shorter time-span—three to four* weeks *or less. Much of this time is consumed by the time it takes a manuscript to reach us and then to return to you when mailed at any rate other than First Class. When a manuscript takes longer to be returned to you, it is because it was read by more people—an indication that it was almost good enough to sell to us and made its way up the editorial chain further than*

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most do. As an author myself I share your impatience; I've yet to hear about a submission to another publisher I made in August. We do accept simultaneous submissions, but I've found they often lead to problems if more than one editor accepts such a submission. Simultaneous submissions should be clearly identified as such.—TW

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Act of August 12, 1970: Section 3685. Title 39. United States Code)

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9. For Optional Completion by Publishers mailing at the regular rates (Section 132.121, Postal Service Manual) 39 U.S.C. 3626 provides in pertinent part: "No person who would have been entitled to mail matter under former section 4359 of this title shall mail such matter at the rates provided under this subsection unless he files annually with the Postal Service a written request for permission to mail matter at such rates."

In accordance with the provisions of this statute, I hereby request permission to mail the publication named in Item 1 at the reduced postage rates presently authorized by 39 U.S.C. 3626.

Sol Cohen, Publisher

11. EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	Actual Number of Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
A. Total No. Copies Printed (Net Press Run)	67,598	67,049
B. Paid Circulation		
1. Sales through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors and Counter Sales	21,132	20,000
2. Mail Subscriptions	1,366	1,664
C. Total Paid Circulation	22,498	21,644
D. Free Distribution by Mail, Carrier or other means sample, complimentary, and other free Copies	0	0
E. Total Distribution (Sum of C and D)	22,498	21,644
F. Copies Not Distributed		
1. Office use, left over, Unaccounted, Spoiled, After Printing	1,664	3,489
2. Returns from News Agents	43,436	41,916
G. Total (Sum of E & F—should equal net press run shown in A)	67,598	67,049

I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

Sol Cohen, Publisher

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the staining process—two coats, plus a coat of wax—has been quite an undertaking.

I mention all this as a prelude to the following.

In the last month two companies have released record albums of material by Robert E. Howard.

Both companies sent me copies. From Alternate World Recordings, Inc. comes *Robert E. Howard: From the Hells Beneath the Hells* (AWR 4810). From Moondance Productions, Inc., comes *Robert E. Howard's Conan* (10-18-75) (sounds like a date, doesn't it?).

Both are spoken-word albums, and consequently it took me a while before I had the opportunity to listen to them—since I do much of my album-listening while otherwise occupied with reading, editing or writing, and these were obviously unsuitable for such occasions. I ended up listening to them while rubbing stain over what seemed like acres of wood.

Each has been issued in limited editions. *Hells* was pressed at 1050 copies; *Conan* at 1500. The price of the latter is $6.00 including postage and handling; *Hells* is $7.98.

In many respects the albums complement each other. *Hells* has a lovely black & white cover by Jeff Jones, very much in the style of J. Allen St. John and Frank Frazetta, and an accompanying booklet which contains the text of the album. *Conan* has a color cover by Tim Conrad, in the style of Marvel's Barry Smith. It lacks any text, but if one was needed perhaps copies of the early Roy Thomas-Barry Smith Marvel comics of Conan would be most appropriate.

The differences in approach are most evident when one listens to the albums themselves.

Hells consists of readings by Ugo Toppo of four pieces by Howard: two poems, "The Song of a Mad Minstrel" and "Altars and Jesters—An Opium Dream;" and two short stories, "The Curse of the Golden Skull" and "The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune," the latter a King Kull story which occupies the whole of the second side.

Conan, by contrast, consists of dramatizations, radio-style, of two Conan stories, "The Tower of the Elephant" and "The Frost Giant's Daughter." The former is credited to an adaptation by Roy Thomas, and appears to be in fact based on Thomas' original *Conan* comics script. Mention is made in the liner notes of the fact that both stories were originally produced as radio dramatizations. Unfortunately, no radio series is yet in the offing.

I say "unfortunately," because, obviously, fantasy is better suited to radio than to television. (When I queried our readership a year ago about the possibility of a sword & sorcery tv show, the general reaction was negative—not only did readers feel that the show would, of necessity, be too violent; they also feared that their favorite characters would be poorly cast and improperly visualized.) In radio, as in the printed word, one's imagination is called into active play: one must visualize for oneself what one is reading or hearing.

Obviously, then, dramatizations of Conan for radio would seem a better bet than those aimed at the visual media. However, in this case I'm not satisfied that good intentions are enough.

The basic problem with the *Conan* album is that it aims its sights too low—at a comic-book conceptualization of Conan—and that the dialogue is simply too often unintentionally funny. Purple prose and ringing declamations may work in a comic production—one reads fast and gets most of the information from pictures—but when actually spoken

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aloud they must sound ludicrous or silly. Too much of *Conan* is unbelievable as dramatized. The laughter of the Frost Giant's Daughter, for instance, while described as beguiling, is simply embarrassing and repetitious. Nonetheless, I wish the people at Moondance Productions luck with their efforts and greater success in future productions.

Hells is more in the tradition of the spoken-word recording: readings rather than dramatizations. Here no "adaptations" are required; one has simply to read the original text. Mr. Toppo has a sonorous voice which seems well suited to his material. He reads well. And because his material is more varied, more reflective on the whole—no swordplay and only subtle sorcery—the album is more suited for adult listening.

Still, I wonder how great the market is for spoken word recordings in our field. Such records cannot be used as "background music;" they demand one's total attention. In this day and age, is anyone ready to give up half an hour or more of his or her time in order to listen to spoken recordings? How many times can one play and enjoy such records before tiring of them?

These are questions yet to be answered. In the meantime, Roy Torgeson, of Alternate World Recordings, tells me that he has an ambitious schedule for subsequent releases. By the time you read this, a second album will be out, this one readings of his own material by Fritz Leiber (the release date is February 13th). And in April (release date: April Fools Day) two more albums, by Robert Bloch and Harlan Ellison, each reading his own material. (Torgeson tells me that these will sell for $6.98 each, since he increased the pressings from 1050 to 3,000; advance orders, advertised elsewhere in this magazine, will be at $5.98.) Alternate World's plans are to continue with this program, recording most of the better authors in our field, and, possibly, to issue recordings based on this magazine and its sister publication, AMAZING SF. Where will it all lead? It's too early to tell as yet. I have some doubts myself—there is no way I will be able to keep up with the albums if this idea catches on and they turn into a flood—but certainly a new avenue has been opened for fantasy and its ultimate destination is one we cannot yet foresee.

A LETTER FROM LUPOFF: Periodically Richard Lupoff writes to tell me what has been happening to his old friend, Ova Hamlet. Quite often he encloses with his letter Ova's latest opus. This time is no exception. Dick writes—

Dear Ted:

As you know, Ms. Ova Hamlet seems to regard me as her dearest—perhaps only—friend. And for some reason she keeps giving me copies of her weird maunderings, which I make it a practice to edit a little (only for purposes of removing unprintable obscenities) and send along for the pages of FANTASTIC. The income thus derived has furnished Ova with all of the amenities of gracious living. Why, the last time I visited the flat she shared with the late Sir Duncan Hamlet in posh West Oakland, I stood aghast with admiration of Ova's new Atwater-Kent superheterodyne, her Edison patent wax-cylinder gramophone, her recent copies of *Collier's*, *Astonishing Stories*, and *Spicy Planet Yarns*. It was truly a night to remember.

Of course, since the tragic death of Sir Duncan Hamlet (run over by a Bucyrus-Erie steamroller in Canton, Ohio) and Ova's somewhat precipitate remarriage to Killy Tee, the old dear

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seems to have dropped out of sight.

Or should I say . . . *seemed.*

For the other morning around four o'clock I was awakened from a sound sleep by the insistent jangling of the Bell telephone, and the sound, when I picked up the receiver, of a disgusting squawk of a voice that I recognized as the famous tones of that very Killy Tee.

"Lupoff," Tee grated into the telephone, "get over here quick! Ova's calling for you and she won't settle for nobody else, not even for a glass of rotgut cooking sherry!"

He gave me an address and I set out as fast I could get my Willys-Knight cranked up and onto the back road. (I'm not allowed on the freeway in my Willys-Knight; that's grossly unfair of the California Highway Patrol but I can't help it, they say the car is a menace.) Killy and Ova have set up housekeeping in a trailer court in Pinole, a town some thirty miles northeast of here near the Carquines Straits.

The trailer court, to be brutally frank about it, is located at the place where the exhaust fumes from the Union Oil refinery in Hercules meet the airborne refuse of the C&H sugar plant in Crocket. The two aerial streams of obnoxiousness combine steadily over the trailer court, producing a fallout the likes of which you would simply not *believe,* Ted. And I know you've smelt North Jersey!

Sealing my nostrils with the old swimmer's nose-clips that I saved from my days as a junior swimming instructor at Camp Orinsekwa for Boys, I plunged into Killy and Ova's trailer and found my old pal slumped over a sheaf of yellow-pad papers, eyes shut, mouth open, and an old steel-nibbed dip-pen stamped "Property USPOD" clutched in her grimy talons. She was moaning and hiccoughing and writing steadily except when she stopped to dip her steel nib.

It's odd, Ted, the way little details grab you in a moment like that. All I could think of was to ask Killy where Ova could get bottled ink nowadays.

"She can't, you moron," Tee explained graciously. "She's using a jug of *salsa caliente* that she lifted off'n Gonzalez's Bodega down ta King City last week!"

"But what's she writing?" I demanded, craning my neck to make out the faint pinkish scratches on the yellow pad.

"She ain't writing nothing, you fool!" Killy informed me courteously. "Ain't you never heard a autocratic writing? That's autocratic writing she's doing! I don't know who the hell is sending the messages, but Ova sure's hell never wrote nuthin' like *that* before!"

He gestured dramatically toward the still-growing pile of manuscript pages, lurching off balance as he did so and knocking open a window with one elbow. Nose-clips or no nose-clips, I made fast to get that window shut again before I did anything else. But at that moment Ova croaked the following enigmatic words: "Gimme the damn lolipop, you oaf!"

Ted, there wasn't any lolipop in sight! What could she have meant? Surely it's beyond me, but that must have been intended as some sort of signal, for having said it, Ova belched a couple of times, sat up, scratched here and there under her baggy housecoat and opened her eyes.

First thing she said once she was awake was "Gimme some o' that Vintage Two O'Clock cooking sherry, Killy you old creep!" Second thing she said was "Dick! How the hell are ya, you old jackass! Good to lay eyes on you again!".

I asked her if she had any idea what the writing was and she said she'd had a nightmare about being

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locked in a traveling phonebooth with Philip Jose Farmer for six months but she didn't remember anything about *writing* and she didn't recognize the manuscript at all. "Still," she crooned, "it looks like about ten thousand words to me. Type it up and tell Ted White that it's *twelve*, that'll make an extra forty bucks if we can fool him, and you can keep the forty for your trouble. I'll use the rest of the money to buy a spiffy relic I saw over in an antique store in Benicia t'other day. A genuine Piltdown man potsherd!"

Well, Ted, I don't know what Ova's going to do with a genuine Piltdown man potsherd, but I'll use my forty bucks to pay for the sinus treatments I needed when I nursed my poor wheezing Willys-Knight home from the trailer court in Pinole. If it hadn't been for those good old Camp Orinsekwa for Boys nose-clips, I don't think I'd have made it at all.

So please send my share of the money care of the Local Fraser Health Group that I subscribe to.

Yours truly,
Dick Lupoff

PS—

Of course since Ova didn't really *create* "God of the Naked Unicorn," I'm not 100% certain that she deserves the by-line for it. You understand the theory of "autocratic writing." But you might have trouble clearing the by-line of the *real* narrator of "God of the Naked Unicorn," so I suggest that you go ahead and credit it to Ova Hamlet anyway. Besides, the old broad needs the ego-reinforcement of seeing her name in print once in a while.

YOU'LL SEE IT HERE, next issue—"God of the Naked Unicorn" by Ova Hamlet. Don't say you weren't warned.

And next month, don't forget: the gala 50th Anniversary issue of AMAZING SF. It's one issue you won't want to miss!

—TED WHITE

The Future In Books (Cont. from page 117)

about Fantasy's Prodigy, Rebel, Humanist, Monster, Prose Poet in the Age of Space, Prose Painter of the Mind, the Incredible Thinking Man, and *Humanista Del Futuro*—as he is variously described in articles about him listed here. In short, this book tells, shows, and especially lists practically everything by and about the October Man himself.

The fascinating fact-packed chronology—first remembered snowfall at six months, the Chaney *Hunchback of Norte* (sic) *Dame* at three years, the reality of death at five and a half, Oz at six, whooping cough and Poe at eight—reads like a Bradbury story and the photolog looks like one: everybody smiling save for "Shorty" scowling most determinedly after the *Hunchback*, as if he were "The Small Assassin" himself.

There is a wealth of illustration that has everything but color—Bok covers of his fanmag *Futuria Fantasia*, 27 foreign-language covers of *Die Mars-Chroniken (Chronique Martiennnes, Kroniki Marsianskie)* on one page, a page from the comic-strip version of "Mars is Heaven," record covers, film and TV stuff, well over 50 facsimile pages—it's all here, folks, for lovers of the man whose writing I remember gusting like clean country wind, bearing images bright as butterflies and sharp as pine needles, through the mostly coal-smoke prose of those 1940's *Weird Tales*.

—FRITZ LEIBER

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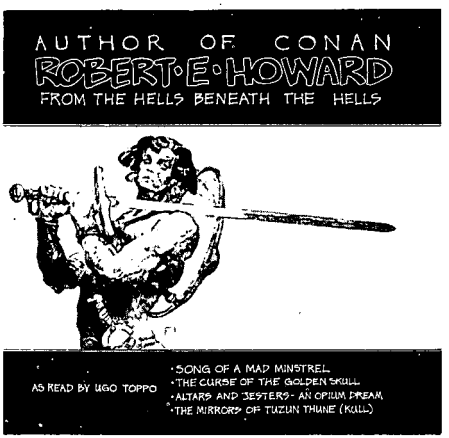
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